

# Q&A with Katy Daley – Tom Mindte

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Tom Mindte, head of [Patuxent Music](#) and bandleader of [Patuxent Partners](#), stores an extensive record collection at his studio in Rockville, Maryland. I asked him how his interest in collecting and music got started.

**TM:** Dad had a heating and air conditioning company, which is still going to this day. A lot of times people didn't have any money to have their heat fixed so they would barter. One time he fixed someone's heat and they gave him a crank-up Victrola full of records. About three-quarters of the records were in German and there were a few Hawaiian records in there, too. They were really cool because they had Hawaiian guitar which sounded like a Dobro. There were also some vocal records from the '20s and I just loved that. I was fascinated and I played those records over and over. There are still a few of them here at the studio. I was about 8 years old then. When I got a little older I would go around to antique stores and record stores and buy records because I was going to be a record collector when I grew up. And I'm still going to be one when I grow up. I loved 78s because of the history of them and they would spin around real fast.

**KD:** How did you start playing music?

**TM:** My mother's parents, Margaret and Ed Hohmann, were both musicians. Grandpa played the fiddle and clarinet. I never heard him play because he quit playing when he got married. I guess he thought that was something young people did, and now it was time to raise a family and go to work. He was in some local string bands and I have some pictures of him playing with string bands in the teens. Grandma played the piano and organ and she played for the silent pictures there in Littleton, West Virginia. She had to watch the screen and play something appropriate.

She didn't play much after she got married but the old piano was still at her house. When I was 5 or 6 years old I opened up that piano and it was terribly out of tune, but I was able to pick out melodies on it. If I knew the song I could find it and play it. They thought that I had some musical talent. Maybe I did; maybe I didn't but they wanted my parents to get me into playing music. So dad brought home a xylophone that he bartered for with one of his customers. Nobody in the family liked it. Mom didn't like it because it was huge and we had a small house. She thought it was ugly and I wasn't big enough to play it so he traded it for a mandolin. I've heard the Stonemans tell this same story but this actually happened to me. Dad hung that mandolin on the wall and he said "Don't touch that while I'm at work." Of course, I couldn't leave it alone then.

**KD:** Did you ever ask later if he really meant that or was it just his way...

**TM:** He could tell that I'd been playing it. He didn't reprimand me or anything so it must have been all right. I was just finding melodies on it. I didn't really know what to do on it, but I did know how to tune it. I don't know how I knew but I figured that out what each string was supposed to be. Dad was a bluegrass fan and he used to go see The Country Gentlemen. He told me he went to see Buzz Busby at the Pine Tavern in '53. He would have been 19 years old then. He was into bluegrass pretty early.

**KD:** Where would he go see The Gentlemen?

**TM:** The Shamrock and I don't know where else. I'm sure he went there a lot. He had their records. Every time they came out with a new record, he would get it. *The Traveler, Bringing Mary Home*, and all those. John Duffey would talk about Bill Monroe, so Dad bought some Bill Monroe records. I got to go to Berryville. And he liked George Jones. He liked country, too, so we went to see George Jones and Buck Owens. I don't know what order these were in. Probably George first. Meanwhile, I'm picking out these melodies. I didn't know how to make the chords. In the 4th Grade they told everybody to come to the auditorium. Those of you who want to play an instrument, we're going to demonstrate them all and you're going to pick the instrument you want. A guy came out and blew on a horn. Another one came out with a clarinet and a big old tuba. Then a guy came out with an accordion! Those other instruments were one note. Doodle doodle do, just the melody, which was what I was already doing. I don't think I even knew what chords were. Anyway, this accordion sounded like a whole band. I said: That's what I want to do. Well, Grandma hated that idea, but I don't know why. She wanted me to be in the school band and accordions didn't play in the school band. They just went off by themselves. Anyway, I won them over and got the accordion. That's how I learned what chords were.

**KD:** Now I've seen a picture of you playing the accordion with a bunch of other little kids. Were you in a club or was that some kind of ensemble?



**TM:** Ensemble? No, that was the class with all the accordion players. Accordions don't work well with others. I mean (chuckle) each one would play their own piece at the recital and that's it. You didn't play with anybody. I learned the chords and then I said: OK, now I know what John Duffey's doing. He's playing those chords. I figured a few of them out on the mandolin.

But I didn't really get that interested in the mandolin. I was trying to get better on the accordion. I was taking lessons and I knew the technique. But when I got a driver's license and was able to go out to festivals and stuff and saw how much fun people were having picking in the parking lot. That's when I got serious about mandolin.

**KD:** Which festivals did you go to?

**TM:** Berryville was the main one. Gettysburg, but not where it is now. It used to be at Black Horse Campground. And a little later, Indian Springs. Oh yeah and Take It Easy Ranch.

**KD:** In Calloway, Maryland?

**TM:** Yeah. That's all I can think of now but there may have been others. I got together with a few other pickers who wanted to play and none of them could sing. I didn't really think of myself as a singer but no one else was even willing to try to sing. I had to sing all the songs. People seemed like they weren't covering their ears. Seemed like they liked my singing so I thought maybe I'm a singer. I kept working on that. Then I started going to Shakey's Pizza right here in Rockville. On Saturday nights they had bluegrass and it was Appalachian Reign. Tom Knowles always had top-notch pickers in his band because we had all these great pickers in DC. Some of them had been in Bill Monroe's or Stanley Brothers' bands. They wanted to play and keep their chops up.

**KD:** I know Lamar Grier was one, who else?

**TM:** Lamar Grier was in it at one point, Joe Meadows, Buzz Busby, Porter Church was in there for a while and later Kevin (Church). Bill Torbet, who used to play with Jimmy Martin and another guy, Nevin Lambert. I think his uncle was Curley Lambert. Now, this is the difference between young players and old players. Now those guys were in their '40s then. After they got through a 4-hour gig, we would go out behind Shakey's and pick more. So I got to pick with those guys.

**KD:** And then you go straight from there to work, right?

**TM:** Fortunately, it was Saturday night. But, yeah. I have done that. So that's kind of where I met Buzz. I had met him a few times and he knew my name, but I really got to know him when he was picking with Tom Knowles. That brings us to Southern Maryland. Dean Stoneman, who is the brother of Scotty, Donna, Patsy and all of them. When the rest of them moved to Nashville, Dean and some of the other Stonemans stayed in DC. Dean had a band but was not always in good health. If he wasn't able to make a gig he would call Bryan Deere to play the mandolin. If neither one of them could make it, they would call me. I was the 3rd string mandolin player in Dean Stoneman's band. One night I was there playing Dean's part when Buzz Busby and Lucky Saylor came in. They were expecting Dean Stoneman and they got me. They sat right at the front table.

**KD:** What was the name of the venue?

**TM:** Larry's Place. It used to be Goldie's Place and it changed to Larry's Place. Lawrence Adams was the owner. He was a one-armed man who worked every night until 2:00 in the morning. When he died they found a million dollars buried in milk cans on his land. He didn't have to work and he put up with that....he put up with us and everybody else in that stinking bar. That's weird. He had one arm so I bought him a Clap On for a Christmas present.

**KD:** Did he like that?

**TM:** Yeah. Anyway I'm there playing in Dean's Band and Buzz and Lucky come in and sit at the table that abuts the stage. They're right at my feet, literally. Every time I took a break on the mandolin, Buzz would point at me and laugh. That was aggravating. Here's this guy, one of my musical heroes, pointing at me and laughing. When we went on a break I went and sat at their table and asked, "Buzz, why did you do that? I'm doing my best." He said, "Aw, I didn't mean no offense, son. I just thought what you were trying to do was humorous. If you want to do it the right way, come over and I'll show you the right way." So Bryan Deere and I started going to Buzz' apartment in Columbia (Maryland) about once a week. He tried to show me stuff but he was not a very patient teacher. I think I picked up a lot from his recordings, more so than from him. But he was happy to have company and be able to pick and cut up and have a few beers. We would pick him up and take him places where there was music.

Meanwhile, I'm in my early '20s and I had a band called the Montgomery County Ramblers, and we played at O'Brien's Pit Barbeque every Monday night. The worst night to have a gig but at least we had a regular gig. Our banjo player was Bill Blackburn who had played with Buzz in the

'50s, Jim Barnett who is a great guitar player and plays like Clarence White. So that was going on.

I was at Ralph Stanley's festival in 1982 or '83. Larry Sparks was there and it was pouring down rain and there were only 2 people in the audience. Larry was up there doing a show just like the whole place was full. He probably couldn't see there were only 2 people there because of the lights. The other guy who was there was Danny Beach who was from Maryland. He liked the Stanley Brothers so we got him in the band and we changed the name to Patuxent Partners. He already had that name and he had bookings. So we just added him, took the name and went on.

**KD:** So Patuxent Partners at this time included...



**TM:** At that time, Danny Beach, Jim Barnett, Mike Marceau. Then we got Curtis Tabor on the fiddle. We'd been through a lot of banjo players. John Barney was after Bill Blackburn moved back to Nevada. Then we got John Brunschwyler. He left and then we got several others: Mark Delaney was one and now John's back.

We played mostly in the bars in Southern Maryland because that's where Danny lived, and he could book them and they liked traditional bluegrass, and they still do down there. That went on for a while. Just playing bars and no forward movement. I mean it was fun and sometimes the music was good. It was just something we did on weekends.

**KD:** How would you characterize Patuxent Partners' music?

**TM:** Then?

**KD:** Now.

**TM:** It was a lot different with Danny because we did a whole lot of Stanley Brothers' songs, and that was our main thing. Jim Barnett liked Clarence White and the Kentucky Colonels so we did some of their songs. That's sort of what the music was. When Bryan Deere came aboard, he was into the DC thing. He was into Buzz and the Stonemans, and so was I. I could never get anybody interested in doing that stuff. Danny would do a couple because he played with Buzz for a while. We started doing that pre-Country Gentlemen, DC-style of bluegrass: Buzz, the Stonemans, Benny & Vallie Cain, stuff we heard on the local radio growing up. That was our hometown music.

**KD:** So how would you characterize pre-Country Gentlemen DC sound? Because I would include John Duffey, also.

**TM:** Yeah! The Country Gentlemen's early stuff had that sound, then they got more sophisticated. They did some pop tunes bluegrass style and changed it up. It was still great but it wasn't the same. Now in the Carolinas and Virginia, the songs are about mother, home, cabin and all that. And they're great. And down south the music is played in auditoriums and schoolhouses. Places like that. Here, it's played in bars so it's drinking songs, country honky-tonk songs done bluegrass style. And songs written to emulate those kind of songs. And that's the difference. And Baltimore had that, too. Their music was even a little bit more hardcore than DC. We had the white-collar stuff here. Those people discovered bluegrass here, and it was for them. Baltimore didn't have that and it was very hardcore honky-tonk bluegrass.

**KD:** Who was playing up in Baltimore then?

**TM:** Some of it's before my time but Earl Taylor, Walt Hensley, and guys like that.

**KD:** Del McCoury...

**TM:** Del, yeah. He pioneered it. And, of course, Del was still around here playing a lot of places up there. I'd go to see him at places like the Sandpiper. And there was the Sea Gull Inn and Club Ranchero or something like that. Ray Davis would put those shows on and have three or four bands on Sundays and they were all good.

**KD:** And Hazel Dickens was there?

**TM:** She was there sometimes. I think, and you know this, I think there was some kind of a bias against women in bluegrass..

**KD:** What?!?! No.

**TM:** So she didn't get the opportunities that she should have. She was just as good as all those men. I didn't see her at any of Ray's shows. But she was playing in the bars.

At some point in the '80s, Buzz retired officially from music. He had a big retirement gig at the Birchmere. He had some of his brothers and some of the guys who played with him over the years. He wanted to go on SSI, which is a form of Social Security that you can go on early if

you're disabled. So he had to convince the government that he was disabled, so he couldn't be out playing music. He retired and he sat around the house miserable.

He decided to risk his status as a disabled person and start the band up again. So he gave me a call. This was in '89 or '90. The earliest tape I have of this band is '90 but it may have started in '89. He called me up and said, "I need a guitar player. I'm going to start the band up again, and I already have every Sunday booked." He said, "Look, if you're not good enough I'm just going to tell you because this is business. Can you handle that?" And then he says, "Oh by the way, bring a banjo player." (chuckle) I took Mark Delaney and we went to Buzz's apartment and we played for a couple hours, and he said, "I reckon you'll do so just be there on Sunday and here's the songs we're going to do." This is before cellphones and email. When I got home, the phone was ringing. It was Buzz and he asked if I could play bass. I said no. He asked if I had a bass. I said no. He said "Get you a bass. I want you to play bass because Lucky Saylor gave me a TV set so I have to give him the job on guitar." I said, "Buzz! I thought you were going to be professional and this was business!" He said, "I know, but a TV is a TV." (laughter) This was on a Tuesday and we were going to play on Sunday. I had a challenge ahead of me. Wednesday I took off work and I went to Chris Warner's store in Hanover, Pennsylvania and I bought a bass. Sunday I went and played the gig.

**KD:** How'd you do?

**TM:** I did great and we played every Sunday. That gig ended, but we got Friday nights in Manassas and we played the Washington Folk Festival. OK, this is easy. I'm a bass player. People saw me playing with Buzz Busby. A guy asked if I could play with him at Tiffany Tavern and I said, "Right-o! I'll be there." I found out I couldn't play the damn bass because what I was doing was following Buzz and Lucky. Their time was good, so all I had to do was follow them. When I was expected to set the time, I was all over the place so they could hardly play with me. That was the end of that. I never did that again. I just kept playing with Buzz until he had to quit playing. I haven't played much since. I've been forced to a couple of times. I found out I wasn't much of a bass player. That experience gave me a lot more respect for bass players.

**KD:** In the meantime, how's Patuxent Partners faring during all this?

**TM:** Well, Buzz had every Friday night for a while so my Friday nights were booked with him. That lasted about two or three years. Patuxent Partners were getting a little better. We started playing Lucketts and we played a lot of things for the Tri-State Bluegrass Association, we played Gettysburg. That was a big deal.

**KD:** At what point does the band say: This is what our look is going to be, this is what our music will be.

**TM:** When Vicki (Victoria McMullen) started with the band in '92. She's the one and she's perfectly correct, she's the one who thought we should dress alike and look like a band. Buzz said, "As long as you're dressed better than the audience, it doesn't matter what you wear. If

you're dressed like the audience they'll think that the band looks like them so why should they pay the band. There were always a lot of pickers in the audience. If you're in a bar just wear good slacks and a shirt it doesn't matter what color just so you're a little better dressed than the audience. And don't get to the gig drunk. I don't care once you get there, you can have a drink." Those were Buzz's only two rules.

**KD:** Don't get there drunk...

**TM:** Don't get there drunk and dress better than the audience. (chuckle) Vicki straightened us out on the attire.

Anyway, the Buzz thing went on for three or four years and he got Parkinson's and he couldn't play anymore.

John Brunschwyler came back in the band in 2005, but before he did he told me about a festival in Ireland, and that I should go because it's fun. I went in 2004 and I had Nate Leath with me. I ended up being responsible to raise him since he was 15. He was young and so I took him to Ireland. I got on the stage and all three of us — John, Nate and me — were in different bands then. We decided to make up a band with just the three of us and play the festival next year. They asked who our guitar player was and I said Dede Wyland. They said, OK you're booked. I got on the phone in my hotel room and called Dede Wyland and said we're booked to play in Ireland next year. Fortunately, she said OK. We went over the next year and played it. The next two years we took the Patuxent Partners, except Jack and Vicki couldn't go, so we got subs.

We got to play a festival in Australia. Bryan Deere and I were camped at Galax and we were doing Buzz's songs. These teenagers came over and said, "Oh Buzz Busby. He's our favorite." Turns out that their parents ran the festival down there and that's how we booked that. Once you get a few really cool things like that people are more likely to book you for other things.

**KD:** You haven't mentioned some of the people I listened to. Maybe because they were on the Virginia side. Cliff Waldron, Leon Morris... Were they on your horizon?

**TM:** Yeah! I used to see Cliff at the Red Fox. Their music was later. Like the Country Gentlemen. It's great. I love it and I have all their records. What I was really drawn to was that early bar room stuff. Cliff is one of my favorites and he's a friend, too. I like the music we do. We're local and there are some fantastic things we get to do every once in a while, but we don't have any desire to live the life on the road. We got to play last year at the University of Chicago Folk Festival. It's run by the students and Buzz had played there years ago. For some reason they liked that old DC style, and they found us on YouTube playing the Washington Folk Festival. When I got his email I thought it was some kind of prank. Fortunately I answered it and it was true. They paid us more money than I ever made before and paid our plane tickets. That was great that we got to do that and were well received.

I don't know if you want to talk about the jazz music that I play.

**KD:** I didn't realize that you did.



**TM:** Having started with accordion, I was listening to some Big Band music a lot when I was a kid. Mom had those records. I had that music in my head, even though I really didn't know how to play it that well. And I got into Bob Wills, too. Western Swing. Chance Shiver and I started the Buffalo Nickel Band in the '80s and we played mostly Western Swing. The bass player, Carolyn Kellock, left. Then we got a husband and wife team, Marv and Kathy Reitz. Marv is a real jazz musician who plays clarinet and he wanted to play old jazz tunes. I learned how to play them on the mandolin. Chance Shiver, the guitar player, left and we got Bob Rubin, who is a fantastic jazz player. So it went from being a Western Swing band to a real jazz band.

**KD:** Did the band use sheet music?

**TM:** I learned to read music when I was learning the accordion but I was never that good at it. When all this happened, I had to do it because Marv wrote out arrangements for the clarinet, guitar, mandolin, or accordion and we did them. I wasn't that great at sight reading. He'd give me the part and I wouldn't let him play it until the following rehearsal. I would take it home and learn it slow.

**KD:** So it's not as improvisational as I think it is?

**TM:** There'll be one section that's written out and then everybody goes off and goes improv.

**KD:** So it's like bluegrass in that the first time through it's the melody and then you do what you want.

**TM:** Except what we do in bluegrass in our singing, they do on their instruments. The harmonies have to go together. That's where the sheet music comes in. We had a gig at Jacques Café in Arlington. I think it was every other Saturday and when that ended the band kind of fizzled out. Then Marv and Kathy and Pete the fiddle player joined another band called Razz'm Jazz'm. They talked the leader of that band into hiring me and I played with them for 10 years. We played at Mason District Park (Fairfax Country, Virginia) and we played at JV on Route 50 in Arlington.

Then Don Rouse the clarinet player died. At the funeral his wife said to me: "Don wanted you to have his records." I said, "Thank you. I'll come over in a couple weeks and pick them up." She said, "It's a little more involved than that." He had 4,000 78s, two or three thousand LPs, piano rolls and sheet music. It took three trips in a 15-passenger van with the seats out to get all of it. I got all those records but now there's no band. We've started the Buffalo Nickle Band up again recently. We're rehearsing with the new version. Our guitar player is Russian. He speaks very little English but he can play jazz. Our first gig is May 13 at a church but I don't have the details on me now.

**KD:** Where did you store these records? In your house?

**TM:** I had to rent a storage locker.

**KD:** Climate controlled?

**TM:** They weren't in there that long. I had recorded a young player who made the mistake of saying, "If there's anything I can ever do for you, let me know." I said, by golly, I need some shelves built. He came up here from Alabama and built me a whole lot of record shelves, upstairs (over Patuxent studio). I had a lot of records already and another 4,000 increased by collection by 15%. I needed that space. They're all up there. I was afraid of the weight so some of them are down here. So that's my jazz playing but I've gotten to record some jazz mandolin because I record a lot of jazz and sometimes they'll let me play. That's all the performance stuff. It's just been a lot of fun and nothing that great. There's a lot of people more accomplished than me and the band. It's a hobby and it's a very good hobby.

**KD:** When I came here this morning you were digitizing music from cassettes. You told me if you just digitized the cassettes that you own, you would not live long enough to do them all.

**TM:** If I did one a day they wouldn't all be done by the time I reached average age expectancy of a male.

**KD:** Do you know how many albums, 78s, cassettes and all you have?

**TM:** Being an engineer, I am anal about that stuff. I can tell you exactly. I have 5,674 CDs, which come from record companies. Some of them come from Patuxent. I have 12,093 10-inch 78s. And I have 10,271 LPs .

**KD:** How would you characterize them? Are they pre-bluegrass? Mostly bluegrass?

**TM:** The early guys, the 1940's guys were on 78s. 78s were ending. There's some small label bluegrass on 78s but most of them are on 45s. A lot of these are country, jazz and stuff like that. There's a lot of old bluegrass in there. I used to go around to record stores. Then when people switched over the CDs they'd call and say, "I have some records for you." Usually, I'll take them. I'm running out of room. I got Bill Offenbacher's tapes when he died.

When somebody dies, I don't like to call their surviving spouse and say, "Hey, got any records?" But Joe Buzzard has no qualms about that. He wanted Bill's records. He didn't want his tapes. He said they want such-and-such for the collection. If you split it with me, you can have all the tapes and I'll take the records. I said, "OK but I get the records that are duplicates of what you already have." That was the deal. Bill went all around in the '50s and '60s and recorded stuff. A lot of them have ended up on LPs and CDs. Gary Reid at Copper Creek has put out quite a few of my tapes from that collection.

**KD:** If somebody reading this had a collection that they wanted to....

**TM:** No. I don't have any more space. I have to turn people down now. Unless there's one or two items that I've been looking for. I can't do it anymore. I can't afford to rent any more space.

**KD:** You mentioned once that many of the people who come in here look through your collection looking for material to record.

**TM:** Victor Furtado plays old time banjo in a way that no one's played it before. He can play any song. We had a Christmas show at Lucketts, and we played those pop Christmas songs like Perry Como sang. He can play them on old time banjo. He had never heard classic banjo from the turn of the century. So he listened to a bunch of that stuff. He'll probably get some ideas out of it. The mandolin player, Eli Wildman, listened to some Jethro Burns and some old classical mandolin players like Howard Frye and Dave Apollon.

You were talking earlier that there are some people who don't think there are young people playing bluegrass. It depends on your definition of bluegrass. If your definition is Flatt & Scruggs, Bill Monroe and Stanley Brothers, there are still some playing it. The music the kids are playing now is based on bluegrass. I think it is bluegrass but it's got other stuff that they've heard. They have the whole world in front of them. Thank God they're not playing rap, hard rock. We've got that and we've got to nurture that.



That's one of the things I'm doing with my record company. The music's going to live on. It's not going to be the same way. It's not going to be stagnant. It's going to change. We still have the basic bluegrass instruments. We have the harmonies the Monroe Brothers, Stanley Brothers and Osborne Brothers came up with. They're still doing those harmonies. They're still playing great leads but they're not still playing like anybody else and they're not doing the same repertoire. Other than *Home Sweet Home*, songs that survive indefinitely. What music lasts 50

years? We're still playing songs made 50 or 60 years ago. They're great and I love them but you can't expect everybody to do that.

**KD:** And the subject matter has changed.

**TM:** I have all that in my head. I can picture that guy who is missing his mountain home and I can sing that song and even though I haven't been there – except on summer trips to my grandparent's homeplace in West Virginia. I never lived that life, but just from listening to this music all my life, I can put myself in that man's footsteps and get that emotion. But you can't expect most teenagers to do that. We're lucky they respect it at all.

**KD:** Patuxent Music does attract a lot of young musicians and people who haven't recorded on a major label. What do you see in them that makes you willing to record them and make it a success?

**TM:** That's half of what I do on the bluegrass side of it. The other half is guys who've been out there and they're still great but they're don't have enough gigs to get a record on a major label. So I record a lot of the old-timers, too. The folks in the middle can make their own way. They don't really need me. But to go back to the kids. I just see these kids and they're so talented and they want to try to make a go of it. They want to play a lot. I can't support it just because of that. I have to make sure they're going to play enough to sell some of these CDs we're making. At least enough to break even. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we do. Sometimes we do and then some. You want to keep this music going in some form. You want people to still play acoustic music. I'll see a band and if I like the music and if they don't have a big head and think they're great, sometimes I'll offer them a recording contract. And they usually think I'm kidding.

**KD:** Let's name some of the people you've recorded: Russ Carson, Jessie Baker, Mark Delaney, Casey Driscoll, Red Allen & Frank Wakefield, Patrick McAvinue, Jordan Tice and Daniel Greeson, the young fiddle player. What a great talent he is.

**TM:** I met him at Mt Airy's Fiddler Convention. He was 11 years old and my buddy Donnie Scott said, "I want you to hear this boy play fiddle." He could play pretty good then. Every year I go to Galax, Mt. Airy and there used to be a few others I went to. I would get a band together with Donnie Scott, who is a dobro player from North Carolina. We got Daniel Greeson to play fiddle with us two or three times a year at the fiddlers conventions. He was getting better and better and I decided it was time for him to have a fiddle album. And that's what we did.

There's Tatiana Hargreaves, who's from Oregon and she's a wonderful fiddler. She was 14 when I did her album. She's finished college now. Nate Leath brought her to my attention. And Nate Leath, himself. I saw him at fiddlers convention when he was 10 or 11. He started playing jazz violin. There wasn't too many young people into that. I asked him when he was 15 to come up and record a jazz violin album. We recorded it.

He didn't get along with his stepfather so he was living at his grandma's. She was very protective of him. She loved him to death and he loved her, but it wasn't going to work. He wanted to move up here. I said OK if your grandma says OK. I knew she wouldn't. Well,

grandma called and said if you let him move up there and have people to play with, we'll help you support him. I said when he gets done with high school, call me back. Two or three months went by he called back and said, "I got my GED."

He was still 15, getting ready to turn 16 and I didn't know if I could handle that, but I said OK. He got up here and I couldn't get him into Montgomery County schools because I only had a power of attorney. I didn't have custody. They said he wasn't a resident and you'll have to pay \$2,000 a year tuition. He already had his GED so I said, "You can go to college." He started at Montgomery College when he was 16. He went there and then he got a scholarship to Berklee Music School in Boston. Now he's a professor teaching at Washington-Lee University. (chuckle) It worked out. He wasn't too much trouble. I mean, there's always going to be issues but it wasn't too bad.

**KD:** We hear people say, "We need young people in the music." They seem to be around. Are they looking for them in the wrong places? You see them in picking situations?

**TM:** It's true that there aren't too many young people in this area playing bluegrass. Very few.

**KD:** Where are they?

**TM:** They're in North Carolina, southern Virginia, where bluegrass started. And there are fiddle camps, music camps. That's where we're getting all these kids. Boys and girls. Used to be that people recognize that their child had talent and the only place to send them was to classical music. Now we have all these camps and we're getting those kids. They super talented and they can play like you wouldn't believe. There are more good instrumentalists than there are singers. The band I just had in here all week – The Wildmans from Floyd, Virginia. They live in a log cabin up on a mountain. Every Friday night in Floyd, there's picking. There's a show at the Old Country Store but there's also picking on the street before the show starts.

**KD:** We've talked about some of the people you've recorded but we haven't talked about how you got into a recording career.

**TM:** Early on a local band heard I had some very basic equipment – a reel-to-reel and the PA system I used with my band. I recorded them and they put my name as engineer on their demos. Those got passed around and people started calling me. I needed to get some new equipment so I bought a multi-track analog recorder, some better microphones and it just went from there. Then I recorded Warner Williams, who's a blues guitarist. I still had the Montgomery County Ramblers so I did a demo for that band that came out pretty good. My dad and I rented the space we're in now for our hobbies. He had some cars and I built the studio. Joe Meadows knew that I had the studio. Joe played Travis style guitar as well as fiddle. In fact he's on a couple Stanley Brothers' records playing Travis-style guitar. Dick Spottswood asked if I could record some music beds for his radio show. Joe came over and we did that. We actually did two or three songs where I played the accordion and Joe played guitar.

There was a record company in North Carolina which wanted to record a fiddle album. Joe said, "I live in the DC area and I'd like to record it at Patuxent." We made a demo and sent it to them.

They thought it was OK and they hired me to do the record. Jimmy Gaudreau, Mike Munford, and Jack & Vicki from my band. We cut that album in the mid-'90s and I got the whole thing mixed. The record company owed me several thousand dollars and they went bankrupt. So I had this mixed Joe Meadows record. The only thing that was on Patuxent at that time was my own band. That's why I made the record label just so it would have a label on it and it would look like a real record not a homemade record. (chuckle) Of course, the band being the same name as the label kind of gave it away. I put the Joe Meadows album out on Patuxent Records. I sent one of them to Dave Freeman at County Sales. He loved it and gave it a super good review and he bought a bunch of the records. Other people bought them and I thought, "This is pretty cool." I'll never get all that money back but at least we sold quite a few of those records.

Then I put out the Warner Williams blues record. I had sort of done that as a hobby just to record him. Then I decided to put that out. I had had a big party planned. John Duffey passed that week and his wake was on that night. I decided to go ahead and have the party as planned because some of the people were coming from out of town. One of the people who went to John's wake was Frank Wakefield. They told him there was a big party going on so he showed up. We did some picking and we got along pretty good. I told him I had a record label. He said, "Oh yeah? Let's pick another song." I felt stupid 'cause it was Frank Wakefield and he has all these records out. A few days later he called me and said, "If you really have a record label, I have some songs I want to record." We did that. I think it was almost the same band I had backing Joe Meadows.

**KD:** Buzz Buzby was a huge influence on you for the early DC sound but I understand Frank Wakefield taught you a lot about Bill Monroe's style of playing.

**TM:** I was trying to play Monroe style before I met Frank but it was so hard. I couldn't get it. You could tell what tune it was but it wasn't like Bill played it. Frank can play every Monroe instrumental and every break on every song note for note and he knows how to teach it. Frank, who is a very patient teacher, would set a couple days aside for students when he came here to record. I learned I had my hand in the wrong position. Once I got that right and started using my little finger it became a breeze to figure out what he was doing and how he was getting all those notes without moving his hand all up and down the neck.

**KD:** Buzz and Frank were great mandolin influences. Anybody else?

**TM:** I listen to Jethro Burns a lot. There's probably someone out there who knows where to put your hand for his stuff, but I don't. I can emulate it a little for swing music. Red Rector is another one I listen to. His style is different. Jesse McReynolds. No one has been able to touch his style ever.

We had a limited number of records in our house – Country Gentlemen, Bill Monroe and some Osborne Brothers and Bill Emerson & Cliff Waldron. The records were limited but I had WAMU. I would tape a lot of those broadcasts onto cassette and learn the tunes. I learned a whole lot of bluegrass from you, Jerry Gray and Gary Henderson just from listening to the radio. Bands would send Jerry Gray records from all over. Jerry would play them and you could hear what was going on in other places. All those bands that came out in the '70s who only made one

or two records, I can tell you exactly who they are because of Jerry Gray playing them on the air. It was a good time to be here in DC and learning bluegrass.

**KD:** Which hat do you think of yourself as wearing most of the time: Musician, Collector, Record Executive?

**TM:** The record label is my main thing. I sell studio time for people doing their own projects. That's a good income but stuff I'm doing for the label is my main thing. As of now everything we've put out is still in print. I have thousands of them. (laugh) This is my little piece of the recording business. It's what I love to do. Sometimes I get surprised and a record will make a lot of money.

**KD:** Who's done well?

**TM:** Danny Paisley's royalties from SoundExchange have paid my rent for the past three or four years. That was very fortunate for me when he came to this label. And fortunate for him, too. I let him do the thing he does best. He does the repertoire that he does on stage so they're all practiced, they don't have to do many takes and they come out great. I finally got him to overdub his vocals instead of doing everything live. He said he's never recorded that way before.

**KD:** How does that improve the sound?

**TM:** He's got more than one shot at it. The whole band doesn't have to play the whole song again if he hits a sour note – which he rarely does. Everyone does every once in a while. So he's able to get the guitar track down and then he can concentrate on singing. He can listen back and get it the way he wants it.

**KD:** So Danny Paisley's been a big one for you. Who else?

**TM:** The Banjo Project sold really well and that was kind of surprising. It cost so much to produce I didn't think I'd recover my investment, but I did. There are a few others. There's a few times when I think "Wow! This is going to be great!" I recorded a musician that I saw play and who I thought was great. It sold 9 CDs other than the ones the person bought. Nine members of the public ordered that CD. No record stores, nothing. Nine CDs. I still love the record. Why? This person's so good. I don't know why. It even got some good reviews but no one ordered it.

**KD:** As head of a label, what else do you have to do? You produce the record, you engineer the record, you probably shepherd these people around town. What about promotion and advertising and getting outlets to buy them? How does all that work?

**TM:** There's hardly any record stores left. So that's a thing of the past. David Freeman at County Sales usually likes the stuff I put out and he usually gives it a good review. We love County Sales.

**KD:** So you have to get people to order the record

**TM:** We send out a bunch of promos. Elderly Instruments has a record distributor called Sidestreet. B-O-M is a distributor in Japan. But that's it. We have them on our website, on CD Baby, and on Amazon.

**KD:** The rest is the artists' responsibility?

**TM:** Other than the *Banjo Project* which sold a whole lot of CDs to the public, most of our sales are physical CDs that the artists buy from me to sell at gigs. The rest of the music sales are digital. iTunes and like that, Amazon and the other places that sell digital music for people to download. All this worry that we had over the sequence of the song, the space between the songs, doesn't matter because they're buying one song or they're not going to play them in that order anyway. All that grief is for nothing. A lot of people buy the music digitally and they're happy. The way we got music when I was young was a 3rd generation cassette, and I learned a lot of music off of that. An MP3 is way better than that.

**KD:** Well, technology has advanced. Used to be you had to all be in the same studio to record. Now you don't even have to be in the same zip code. Record it at home and email it in.

**TM:** Sounds better if they're all in together. You can see each other get the visual cues. I've done it both ways. Scott Vestal is one of the world's best banjo players. When I send him a project to play the banjo on, he doesn't just spend 5 minutes on it. He studies the tune and plays it perfectly. When he sends it back, it's great. He's one exception. A lot of times, especially if it's an unknown artist and you're getting a famous person to put a track on it, they're not interested in spending a lot of time. Some people make a mistake of getting people who are way better than they are to be studio musicians on their album. You should get people who are on your level.

What's happened is, there's a lot of money in studio work and it's a lot easier than going on the road. You can get some famous people because they're available for hire. As long as the music has decent timing and they won't be embarrassed to be on it, they'll do it. It's kind of overkill.

**KD:** What are your engineering credentials?

**TM:** Masters of Science and Electrical Engineering. I got my Bachelor's Degree from Capitol College. Later I got something in the mail from them saying they were offering a Master's Degree. That's the craziest thing I ever did in my life because it took 2-1/2 years away from my life. It was way harder than I thought it would be because a lot of the technology had changed since my undergrad degree. I pretty much had to learn it all again. Anyway, I finally got it. Not that it does me any good because I'm not really designing anything except for my own little hobby stuff. I got it so I'm a real engineer.

**KD:** Do you do music every day? Playing or recording?

**TM:** Yeah. The recording's the easy part. Mixing takes the longest. Most days I'm here working on stuff that's already been recorded. Stuff on the radio now is perfect. The bigger name bands will spend \$25,000 to produce their album. Every little mistake is fixed. When my record comes



on after that, it's got to sound as good as I can get it. I can't let anything go. We have the technology to fix any little thing. Usually people are here two or three days and they get one shot at it. They have an opportunity to overdub stuff but sometimes I end up fixing stuff. That takes much longer than the recording itself. You want to fix it in a manner that's not taking away from what they did so it's still natural. One little flaw in a recording would make it not worthy of airplay nowadays.

**KD:** On your website it says: "Authentic and True, Acoustically and Stylistically." Is that what you're looking for in bands that come here?

**TM:** Yeah. I just do what I like to do and I'm surprised and happy that some other people like it, too.

#### *About the Author*



[Katy Daley](#)

Katy Daley has been a part of the Washington, DC bluegrass and country radio scene, on WAMU's Bluegrass Country and WMZQ-FM. She received DC Bluegrass Union's 2017 Washington Monument Award and named IBMA's Broadcaster of the Year in 2009 and 2011.