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Oregon Bluegrass Association
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Bluegrass Express

Where Were The Women? Oregon Women In Bluegrass

By Claire Lerner

When the Express editor asked for a column about Oregon women in bluegrass, I spent quality thinking it would be a pretty short article.

Eventually names popped up and others took, but women joined in the early days, and times did pass. There are the times we think I'll know, leaving it to others to bring us up to date.

First, let's set the stage.

In the early 1960s, bluegrass was an event of weekly games that are today with a small self-selecting audience. Starting from roughly \$172 by cash and call in the '60s, then later changed from country radio to live "radio" in most parts of the country (we had no really much for bluegrass to hear it).

The fully formed badge community - but not enough to call it a community - radio and popular style in the Pacific Northwest.

So it was a small, disconnected group of Oregonians who found each other in the early 1960s. They were passionate about bluegrass. They had gone to many localizing their own shows in their rooms, working down the grooves in their cars, 40% of the time listening to the radio when they had that were living.

And, as it happened, almost all these players were male.

There was a few notable exceptions. Young Williams had made a name for herself as a fiddler when she studied at Reed College. Barbara Lamb, was a professional fiddler living in Portland, was a change when she would take the bus from Seattle to play with a Portland area band. A couple other women moved back and forth between country-style fiddling and bluegrass.

In Seattle, where most music had been Lee Highway, was in demand as a live place in Oregon and California. She eventually performed with the name "You and I" and then from Portland, California.

And that's pretty much it. So what was going on?

Mike Williams responded, "There just weren't that many players. Everyone knew everybody else." The playing was not different. "They were all private, by invitation only."

And the level of community was pretty high quality.

It wasn't intentionally exclusive. It was just that the community found the experience of playing together. They loved being challenged by each other, loved taking those open-fingering lessons, loved hearing each other's fiddles, and loved the stability of this unique form of music.

"It wasn't that beginners weren't welcome," Mike said, "but they likely would be intimidated and overwhelmed pretty quickly. The good players didn't care about newcomers, a beginner is a pain. They just played like they always did then and there, and you had to find a way to get up to speed with them or stay in the shadows for a while, working on your chops."

Mike said the term "blue jam" probably wasn't even used at the time. "It someone had said, 'Could we play Peggy Oldman's breakdowns in 'Tay Blue Jam?' they probably would have looked puzzled and asked why anybody would want to do that."

For children's events, at that time young women weren't picking up the traditional bluegrass experience. It's worth noting that virtually all of the women playing had instruments were fiddles. In some ways that's because girls were encouraged to learn classical violin but boys and men were not on any gender's order books.

It's hard to speculate about what was going on then and how it's changed.

Let's start with culture.

A lot of the bluegrass experience is based in part on culture from many parts of the U.S.

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