

# ART MENIUS

## Working To Make Bluegrass Grow

Kirsten Weston

By Jack Bernhardt

**T**o readers of *Bluegrass Unlimited*, Arthur C. "Art" Menius must by now seem an old friend. His articles have for years appeared in these pages documenting in thoughtful prose careers of musicians and histories of institutions of bluegrass. As executive director of the newly formed International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA), he has come to know musicians and fans at festivals and shows across the land in his role as industry spokesman. Through dedication and plain hard work Art Menius has emerged as one of the music's most fervent supporters as bluegrass for him has become a way of life.

Born in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1955, Menius became acquainted early with country music. "I heard the music as a kid when you'd have, say, Mac Magaha and Buck Trent on the *Porter Wagoner Show*," Menius recalls. "When my grandmother would take care of me on Saturdays we'd see all the country music TV shows. And if I got up early during the week, Clyde Moody was on WRAL-TV every morning from when I was very little until 1969 or '70. I cannot remember not knowing Monroe's versions of 'Uncle Pen' and 'Muleskinner Blues.'"

Menius earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees in history from the University of

North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and worked for the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. As Principal Researcher, he wrote social histories for the state's Historic Sites Branch.

Late in 1982 Menius was approached by Lawson Warren and Ron Ruehl who had worked as the video documentation team for the Department of Cultural Resources. Warren and Ruehl had recently completed the film, "From Our House to the White House," a documentary tracing the development of clogging teams from individual buck dancing.

Warren and Ruehl had formed a production company, the Linear Group, and



learned that a new cable network, The Nashville Network, was planned. The partners approached TNN and proposed a series featuring early country music that would become *Fire On The Mountain*. Menius was hired by the producers as a consultant to help with research and development for the show as well as other potential programming for the Linear Group. In 1982, Menius' career in bluegrass was launched.

To prepare for his new role, Menius designed for himself a one-year program of study on the history of country music. During 1983, Menius recalls devoting, "twelve to fourteen hours a day learning about country music from a scholarly perspective. As a researcher, I went through everything I could find at the time—books, records... So I was using my historian's chops and applying them to country music."

During the second set of tapings for *Fire On The Mountain*, Menius was asked by the producers to write an article about the show for *BU* (September, 1983). Interviewing for the article Menius talked to Don Reno who, he says, "probably, as much as anybody, drew me actively into bluegrass just because I was so impressed with what a heck of a nice guy he was. I met Doyle Lawson there for the first time and had a real good reaction from meeting him. That got me looking at bluegrass journalism as a field."

By 1984 Menius had become more active with the Linear Group writing introductions and serving as troubleshooter for *Fire On The Mountain*. That year also brought before him a set of responsibilities and experiences that would foreshadow his later work with IBMA.

"The big project for the Linear Group in 1984 was a survey of bluegrass festivals," he recalls. "They originally proposed to me to do a survey at the June Bean Blossom Festival. By then I'd learned enough to know that you couldn't generalize nationally about bluegrass fans, that they were different from region to region and from the sort of festival they were attending. So I pitched to them four surveys that would cover four geographically and musically divergent festivals." Armed with boxloads of survey forms, Menius set out that summer to survey the festivals at Telluride, Colorado (newgrass, West), Bean Blossom, Indiana, (traditional, Midwest), Denton, North Carolina, (contemporary, Southeast), and Peaceful Valley at Shinnopple, New York, (eclectic, Northeast). His travels resulted in the largest survey ever undertaken of bluegrass fans (2,106 questionnaires) and the only survey conducted of a variety of

festival types.

That year the Linear Group was promoting the Liberty Flyer, a folk music format radio show which featured bluegrass. Already understaffed, one of the firm's four employees resigned and Menius was asked to move to Asheville, North Carolina, to serve as publicity director. There he gained additional skills, including marketing to radio stations. "The show launched on January 4, 1985, and ran through the end of the year on as many as 113 stations," he reflects. "I think it showed a lot of potential for our music because there were 113 commercial stations that wanted a syndicated live acoustic music show on which probably two-thirds of the music was bluegrass. It was presented in a really classy and aggressive manner. I don't think anyone had done that with

simply to legitimize an awards show. I started working on that idea but time grew short and it got back-burnered. And as money grew short in May '85, I left Asheville and moved back home to Pittsboro, [North Carolina]."

The next month Menius accompanied the Lonesome River Band on a trip to Baltimore. There he learned that talent agent Lance LeRoy was interested in forming a bluegrass trade association and had scheduled a meeting later that month in Nashville.

That first meeting was attended by people that LeRoy had contacted "pretty much at random," Menius recalls. "Some people got mad that they weren't invited, but I don't think anybody was intentionally not invited. Lance just called some people he could think of who he knew to be interested in bluegrass hav-



L-R: Jerry Brown, Art Menius, Lori Burek, Lynn Davis

bluegrass.

"I learned publicity, which is a lot of what I do with IBMA, by the seat of my pants working on the Liberty Flyer show. That began what would become a way of life for me—sending out press releases to hundreds and thousands of sources. A lot of the IBMA mailing list for press releases came from what I developed on the Liberty Flyer. And that's where I developed my bluegrass association and radio contacts. So as early as January 1985 I had a better list of bluegrass associations than anybody else, and probably a better handle on press sources that would be interested in bluegrass.

"Along about this time Lawson Warren asked me to develop ideas for a trade association for bluegrass. His idea was

ing a trade organization."

In attendance were LeRoy, Pete Kuykendall, Milton Harkey, Bill and James Monroe, Menius and others. Jo Walker-Meador, executive director of the Country Music Association, gave a presentation on the early days of the CMA, and the meeting adjourned with an agreement to meet again in August.

Interest in the proposed organization was indicated by the larger turnout at the August meeting. About two dozen people attended this meeting during which the basic structure of the International Bluegrass Music Association was developed. Six categories of membership were proposed corresponding to professional affiliation. Details were refined for the bylaws, Menius was elected acting secretary, Randall Hylton elected acting



treasurer, and a temporary board of directors was elected that served until June 1986. A public membership meeting was scheduled for October 16, 1985, in Nashville.

In the meantime, Menius, who had already considered ideas for a trade organization while with the Linear Group, began working on ideas and signing up members in preparation for the October meeting. "We started taking founding memberships in August," he says. "We raised nearly \$6,000 in founder's fees. That gave us our initial start and then people started signing up as regular members."

"It became apparent to me and to others that IBMA needed at least a part-time person working whose responsibility was to get the correspondence answered and the members logged and the newsletter out. So I made a proposal to the temporary board of directors to serve as acting executive director, part-time. The proposal was accepted on November 8, 1985. I was acting executive director until the 22nd of August, 1986, when I was made full-time executive director."

In his role as chief executive, Menius began to establish an organization by reaching into the grassroots network which has characterized bluegrass

from its beginnings. With help from Larry Jones of the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association and his friend Bob Reynolds, a printer from Minneapolis, Menius began publishing IBMA's newsletter in December, 1985. At the same time he began to assemble IBMA's first press list and an associations list. Finally was compiled what Menius calls, "probably IBMA's sexiest item so far: our bluegrass radio list that has every outlet we know of that broadcasts bluegrass music, and the contact person and the hours they play bluegrass music."

Menius spent the busy summer of '86 compiling the radio list and representing IBMA at festivals from Nacogdoches, Texas, to Ancram-Hillsdale, New York, and many in between. At the same time he was deeply involved organizing the first bluegrass trade show held in August at Owensboro, Kentucky.

Menius is pleased with the success of the trade show. "I think it was a very bright moment for IBMA in its first year," he says. "The bluegrass trade show is an important stepping-stone for the organization because it gives us an event that brings together the people who work in the bluegrass field to share ideas and contacts—to show other peo-

ple what our products are and what we do. It's a centerpiece of networking for the whole bluegrass community. Networking is something we've lacked to a very large degree in bluegrass.

"As it grows it will provide a centerpiece for the bluegrass calendar, really a punctuation mark at the end of the festival season. It will draw media coverage and the fans' interest, and will be a very special week where we can all be together as an industry and say, 'This is what bluegrass is and we're proud of it.' It's an opportunity to show the variety that can be found within bluegrass, both as a music and as an industry."

According to Menius, IBMA's efforts are aimed toward two sets of inter-related goals: benefit plans for bluegrass professionals, and economic growth for the industry. "By the end of '87 we want to have an insurance plan in place," he says. "And we're also working very fast, with a big push by Sonny Osborne who really grabbed the bull by the horn on this, in establishing a trust fund for uninsured and underinsured musicians that we hope to have operating by the early 1990s. Part of our annual event at Owensboro will be to raise money for the musicians' trust fund. We'll be providing a safety net that won't be just for musicians, but for anyone who's working in the bluegrass field as a professional."

One of IBMA's most important goals, according to Menius, "is to make people aware of bluegrass music. So many people who would like this music and who would be right for the bluegrass community just don't know about it. We were hurt in the early '70s by a lot of the wrong people coming to bluegrass festivals and that led us—especially in the Southeast—to intentionally under-promote; to make the festivals hard to find. We've succeeded in making bluegrass festivals family-style, but now we need to bring more family-style people to these events.

"There's lots of people who have positive feelings toward bluegrass but by not being able to find it they contribute nothing to its economics. There are people I know who've gone twenty years saying they like bluegrass who've never been to a bluegrass festival and who've never bought a bluegrass record. Yet they'll listen to it on the radio, especially if it's in a folk music sort of show, and will go to a bluegrass stage at a folk festival.

"I think inside the bluegrass community we need to realize that people outside have a whole different set of images when they hear the word *bluegrass* than we do. While we might think of Del McCoury, someone outside could think of anyone from John McCutcheon to Emmylou Harris. We need to get the word across what bluegrass is and where it can



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be found at the festivals and club dates, and about our record companies and stores that carry our music.

"A related goal is to make bluegrass as a profession financially attractive to people who want to express themselves musically. We're not talking about megabucks, but about a decent middle-class income so that a talented individual can play and sing bluegrass for a living without having to worry about wolves at the door all the time.

Reviewing IBMA's progress, Menius sees many accomplishments. The greatest success, he feels, is that the organization "has managed to survive and stick together because we're taking on something very difficult which is, in a way, putting bluegrass music back together. We've suffered from splintering off into so many sub-genres: people interested only in traditional bluegrass and people who like the contemporary sound; those who are into newgrass, or into new acoustic music; and people interested only in old-time string band music. We need to put all this together in an organization. We're all part of one family and we need to stick together to survive. There's a tremendous strength in unity."

Consistent with its interest in representing all sectors of the bluegrass community, the IBMA board of directors elected Hot Rize banjoist Pete Wernick as its first president. Wernick, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia University, is highly regarded for his interpersonal skills as well as his musicianship. "Pete's our George Washington," quips Menius. "He's a very thoughtful person who has for years been using his sociological skills to think about the same

problems that the IBMA is addressing.

"His biggest task will be representing IBMA to the musicians and to the people. I think he's a perfect choice for that post. He covers East and West; Hot Rize plays traditional and contemporary bluegrass, and (through their alter ego, Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers) honky-tonk music. He covers a lot of bases, everything from the phase shifter to doing traditional songs traditionally. And of course he'll participate in board meetings and will be chairman of the Nominating Committee for this year's director's candidates."

Menius is aware of concern expressed by some musicians and fans that promoting a noncommercial music in a commercial world may lead to artistic compromises harmful to bluegrass in the long term. Also concerned are some senior members of the profession who recall earlier attempts to organize that have failed. To these issues Menius is eager to respond.

"IBMA is founded by bluegrass people and we all got into bluegrass because of love of the music, not love of money," he asserts. "We are a representative democracy, or republic, in structure and there are elections each year for directors. The people who want to make sure that IBMA does not move in the direction of selling out the music can simply do that by force of number, by joining IBMA and making sure we're kept honest at every step of the game.

"One thing that's extremely important to me and, I think, to everyone in IBMA, is not destroying the critical relationship between the fans and the artists whereby the people determine what bluegrass music is and isn't by whose

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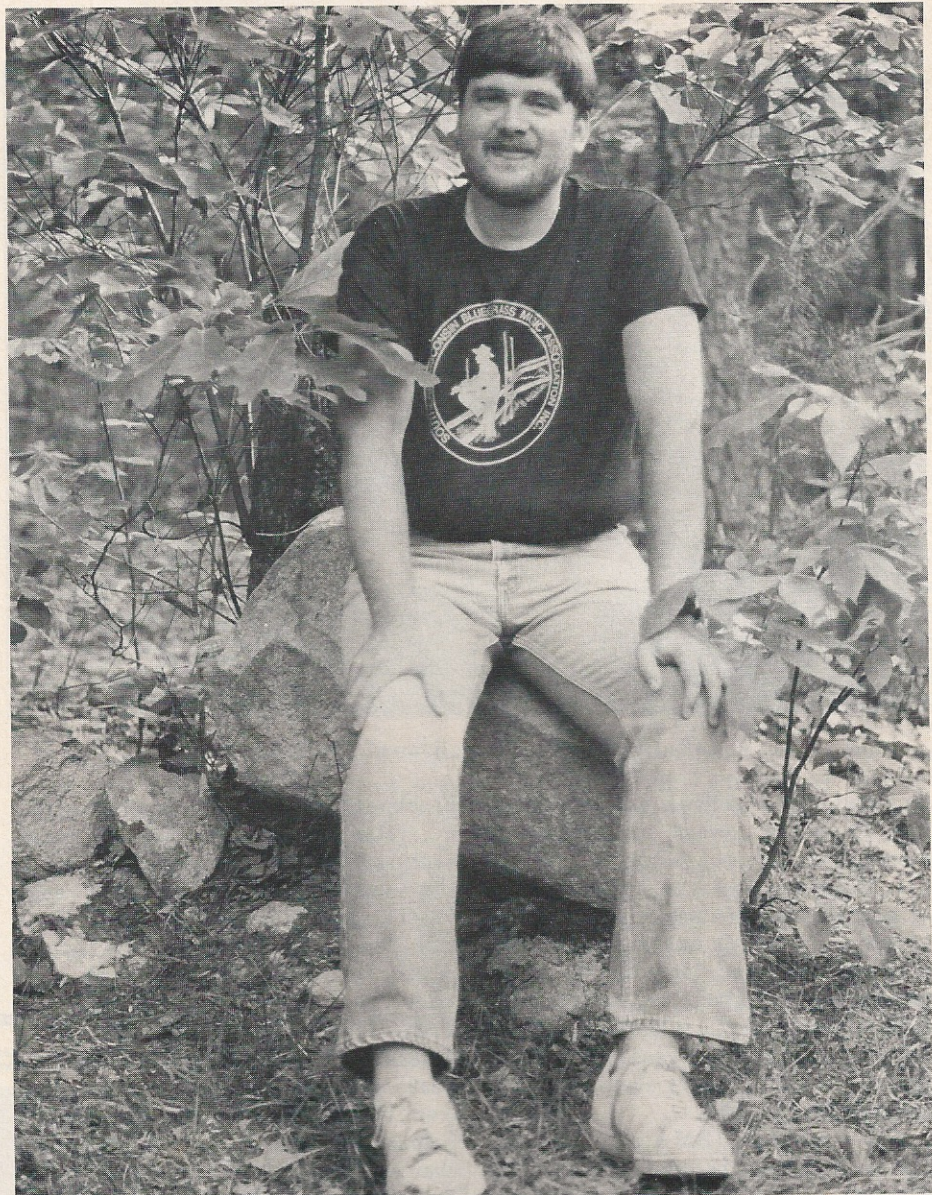


records they buy and who they turn out to see at festivals. A lot of what makes bluegrass so wonderful is that closeness and feedback, or dialogue, between artist and fan. That's the essential character of bluegrass, a primary component of what drew all of us into the music. By no means would I ever want to tamper with that.

"IBMA is not trying to define bluegrass music. That's being left up to the people just like it's always been. The changes that have happened to acoustic, and bluegrass music have happened without the existence of any sort of trade organization. The music's been changing since Day One and as long as it's a living, vital music it will continue to change.

"One of the exciting things about IBMA is that we have a broad base of support. We made it a goal from the August, 1986, meeting to bring together the whole bluegrass community. And also to have a very firm set of bylaws and a division of fiscal responsibility. Previous attempts to organize have failed because the organizers didn't have the important people in our field and didn't have a broad base of support; or because too few people had too much control.

"It's a big step to join a new organization, and we can understand why there's hesitancy. But we need for



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folks to know that we're a democracy and that their voices will be heard in shaping IBMA's course."

By 1988 IBMA hopes to begin work on a central archives and a museum for bluegrass at its headquarters in Owensboro, Kentucky. "The degree of community support is pretty amazing for anyone who's worked in bluegrass long enough to encounter the indifference of people outside the music," Menius remarks. "The community of Owensboro thinks bluegrass is an asset. They were proud to see the people there for the trade show and Bluegrass With Class Festival. They're happy to see their hotel rooms filled up around town, and they're happy that Owensboro is getting known throughout the world because of its association with IBMA."

Menius characteristically forecasts a bright future for bluegrass music, a future he feels IBMA will help shape. "I see within the next four or five years a doubling in radio exposure and in attendance at bluegrass shows," he predicts. "I think musically we'll continue to see new groups coming along that play a new

form of traditional bluegrass, and new groups in all phases of the music.

"Since the mid '70s we've started to see new, major groups come along. Up to that point the major groups were mostly from the first generation. Now we're seeing a new generation of major acts—Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver, Hot Rize, the Johnson Mountain Boys, the Nashville Bluegrass Band, and so on.

"The next few years we'll see some sad times as we continue to lose the people to age who created this music and have been our leaders for four decades. What's important is to help the bands come along that will fill their shoes. That's another reason for the whole community to pull together.

"It's exciting that there are young pickers being drawn to our music; some playing it traditionally and some who are contemporary. It is young musicians bringing new ideas into the field who by their very age assure that there will be people picking bluegrass music forty and fifty years down the line."

