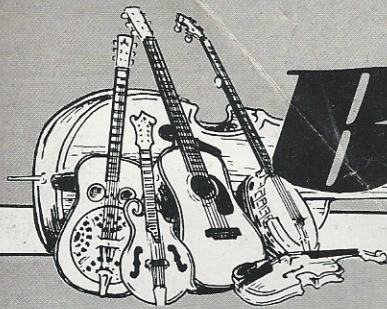


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**BASS MOUNTAIN BOYS**

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Entertaining

# Bass Mountain Style



By Art Menius

Photos by Becky Johnson

Having recorded two albums with Los Angeles-based CMH Records, hosting two popular bluegrass festivals and a number of winter shows each year, six albums already released to ever increasing airplay and have achieved major attraction status in the southeast and midwest—not too shabby for North Carolina's Bass Mountain Boys, who were a local family band just a decade ago. The Bass Mountain Boys have earned a reputation as one of bluegrass music's most improved and popular acts through determination, hard work, solid business practices, warm personalities that shine off and on stage, a recognizable style and never forgetting the fans. Whether performing or visiting with the people, the Bass Mountain Boys always please the folks who make it all possible. That's one of several areas where the band melds maturity with enthusiasm into a winning combination.

John Maness served as bass man, emcee and group leader from the very beginning until the fall of 1989. He continues to manage the act and take primary responsibility for the shows and festivals. This has permitted him to take care of the fine details of both booking his act and presenting his events. He rumbles with enthusiasm when talking about the deal with CMH, which has released albums and CDs for such artists as Eddie Adcock & Talk Of The Town, Jim & Jesse, Grandpa Jones, Merle Travis, Mac Wiseman, the Bluegrass Cardinals, Josh Graves and the Osborne Brothers. "We cut an album to be called '18

Wheels.' Billy Troy [Josh Graves' son] produced the session. Martin [Haerle, President of CMH Records] felt he can sell our material to the truck driving audience. He'd even talked about a compact disc and a regional single release." The last album Maness recorded with the Bass Mountain Boys, "18 Wheels," continued to attract strong national airplay more than a year after its release. The title track stood in the 28th position in this journal's debut "National Bluegrass Survey" in its May, 1990, issue.

While "18 Wheels" continued to draw national airplay, the Bass Mountain Boys returned to Hilltop Studios, as well as the Homeplace, in Nashville for their next project. According to fiddler and songwriter Johnny Ridge, both the band and Haerle suggested some two dozen potential songs each. They culled the list down to 26 selections that the group actually recorded. Twenty-four will be released on a "twin-pack" compact disc and cassette.

Shortly after the release of "18 Wheels," Haerle spoke in glowing terms of the Bass Mountain Boys. "As far as a new group, meaning new to the national radio stations and general

public, they're the most energetic and talented I've seen. They're original, not a clone. Originality and energy, that's the two things that drew me to the Bass Mountain Boys. They did really, really well in the studio. I'm very pleased."

Maness cites one fundamental reason for the Bass Mountain Boys' development: "We've remembered to keep it fun. We're close friends with the Boys From Indiana. They have much the same concept of this business as we do. They each have something to fall back on as far as a line of work or career. They're much like us in that they remember to have fun. We take our music very, very seriously and we take our fans very seriously and when it's time to be serious, we are. But we look forward to traveling on the bus and a lot of groups hate the traveling. We travel about as much as any group... up and down the East Coast and go to the midwest about three times each year; mileage-wise as much as any of them, but we look forward to traveling. We all get along good together and we pick and sing and have fun and enjoy traveling. When one of us might be a little down and out, the others recognize it pretty

quickly and sort of lighten things up. We keep it that way. Everyone tries to respect everybody else."

The way guitarist Mike Wilson explains it is that "We're a five man group, instead of one leader and the sidepeople. There are five of us instead of one plus four."

"That's right," says Maness. "We all try to support the other ones. When you get five different people, of course, you're going to get five different ideas. We all try to keep the same objective and that's the group. If I don't get to do my part on this song or somebody doesn't get to do their part on that song, that's tough. If the song does better that way, that makes it sound better, that's the way we do it."

Because the Bass Mountain Boys are having fun on the stage, it keeps them even more in touch with their audience and able to present the kind of set the crowd demands. As Maness explains, "While we go out with a list of songs that we're going to do, we don't follow those guidelines, we follow what the crowd is reacting to. We may change things all the way around depending on what the crowd is reacting to. If they lean toward a more gospel set or to more instrumentals and a fast pace, or maybe some slower ballads with a tearjerking love song or two thrown in for good measure, it depends on the crowd. We're working more toward a polished relaxed show."

"When we play to somebody that's new to us and they come to the record table, they relax when they find out we're just a bunch of good ole boys enjoying ourselves, they say, 'Well, you all look like you're having the most fun.' And I say, 'Well, we are.'"

"We have fun. If it wasn't fun we'd stay home. It's certainly not the financial gain. It's nice to have extra income, but it's definitely not all from the financial standpoint. I think to the point that any group, no matter how business-oriented they are, if they're going to survive in our mode of music, they have to have fun. They have to like what they're doing. There's no way you can go out there and sell yourself to a audience over a continued period of time at one day shows all over the country without liking it. It can't be done. Now a lot of them might not like to travel like we do, but it's like any other career: you've got to enjoy it to do it right, to do a good job with it."

"We've had a few low points in ten years that we've been playing together, but something always came along to pick us back up and keep us

going. We have never stopped performing or not had a full group in ten years. We've always had somebody to step in and take their place. Most of us have never missed a show."

Banjo picker Steve Dilling, who now handles much of the emcee work, interjects, "That goes back to having fun. We have probably as few personnel changes over the last ten years as anybody. I can't think of anybody I'd rather play with right now."

According to Wilson, it goes back to balancing the needs of the group and the five equal individuals. "We've got our priorities, but if somebody has a conflict, again it goes back to where we're a five-piece group. John does the bookings. If I have a boy graduating from high school, I can't miss that. We work around it and the other guys understand. One doesn't say, 'You've got to do this and you've got to do that.' We make decisions together."

When Maness resolved to leave the road following the untimely passing of his wife Linda in September, 1989, the Bass Mountain Boys recruited Mike Street of Forest City, North Carolina. Dilling, "called me one night and told me they needed somebody," Street recalls. "I tried out and they liked it and I liked it. They're a bunch of good boys to be around and I really enjoy the traveling."

With Street, who played with the well-received Hickory Flat in 1984 and 1985 and with Midnight Flyer from then until 1989, the Bass Mountain Boys rapidly achieved the tightest, most focused version of their exuberant traditional bluegrass sound. Replacing Maness' warm, wry, all-day-singing-and-supper-on-the-grounds' emcee style will take a bit longer.

Professionals and fans who have known the Bass Mountain Boys since back when, gush about the band's musical and performance improvement in such a short period of time. Their rise has meshed learning by doing with steady gains from every change in band personnel.

When the Bass Mountain Boys started to come together in 1974, the pickers had no loftier goals than the back porch and festival jam sessions. As Maness recalls it, brother Joel Maness, who later served as BMB mandolinist for several years, began learning guitar. In order to pick with him, other brother Jeff Maness acquired a cheap banjo and Earl Scruggs' famed instructional book. They soon roped in John, who played harp. He found, however, that the harmonica didn't go over too well at many parking lot sessions.

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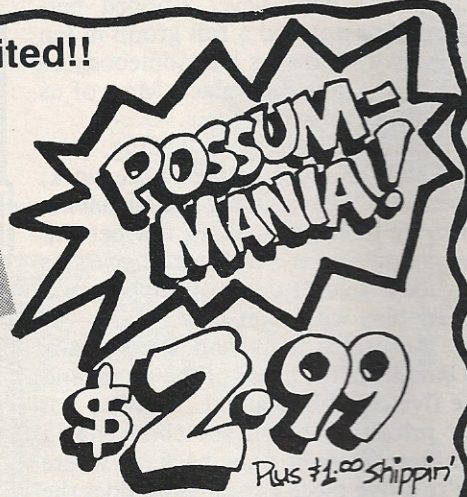
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"We didn't have a bass player. So out of necessity, I started playing a piece of a bass. The first bass I ever had was made out of aluminum. It looked like a fishing boat... The tone wasn't too good," Maness confesses.

He soon graduated to a wooden bass, while Mike Wilson joined the Maness brothers singing lead and picking rhythm guitar. Wilson had been a beach music [that's what they call late 1950s and early 1960s R&B in the Carolinas] fan who, as he puts it, "made the mistake to come to the Camp Springs Bluegrass Festival and that was all it took."

They picked for their own amusement for several years. "We never had any thought," John Maness says, "whatsoever of doing anything professionally. It never entered our minds until '78. Then we decided that since we have the facility, why don't we have our own festival. We have a portion of Bass Mountain, so let's call it Bass Mountain Music Park. So we did." Maness did not even book his own, still nameless band at that first bluegrass event during September, 1978, a few hundred yards from his home on the east side of Bass Mountain, about ten miles south of Burlington, North Carolina.

Since that time, the Bass Mountain Family Bluegrass Festivals, currently presented on Memorial Day and Labor Day Weekends, have grown to a reliable attendance in excess of 2000 folks from Florida to Massachusetts. Since at least 1988, fans from as far as the West Coast have come to North Carolina specifically for the festival! Over the course of the first decade or so of events, partners Maness and Wilson have brought Bill Monroe, New Grass Revival, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, Ralph Stanley, Peter Rowan, Bill Grant & Delia Bell, Dave Evans, Del McCoury, the Johnson Mountain Boys, the Nashville Bluegrass Band, Larry Sparks, the Virginia Squires, the Boys From Indiana, the Chuck Wagon Gang, the Lonesome River Band and a host of others to central North Carolina. The most popular act, year in and year out, at Bass Mountain is generally agreed to be Raymond Fairchild and the Crowe Brothers.

"We're real happy with the festival," Maness says. "It's grown on a steady basis. We haven't had any large changes either way. It's just been a slow steady growth. We've kept it family style. We are now beginning to explore the possibility of bringing in newer and more progressive groups to

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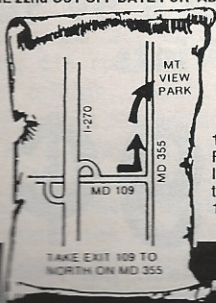
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mix with what we have always had . . . not to say that we're going to be changing our show around, but we're going to be doing something to please a younger audience also. We have got to keep younger people interested in our form of music. So we're going to be using some younger and more progressive groups along with the same traditional groups we've had for ten years.

"We're proud that there's never been a group at Bass Mountain Music Park that didn't get paid, no matter how light the crowd or how bad the weather. That's been a sacrifice sometimes, but that's the way we've always done business. We're happy to say that there's never been an arrest made at our park. We've always managed to keep things in line. Now our bluegrass family that comes to our festivals every year looks after one another. If one sees a problem, he tells one of us and it's taken care of before it could ever be a problem. So it's sort of a one big happy family type of festival."

Wilson sees it as another facet of Bass Mountain style in practice: "Then too, it's fun. It's a lot of work. For a long time we didn't get any monetary gain from it; but it's turned around and makes us a little money now, but that's not what it's all about. It's the friends you make. They're more than fans or people you meet; we share a common interest. That's part of the festival, too. We've got people coming from down in Florida and up in Maryland, so it's got to be something more than just the festival, because there are too many festivals between their home and where we're at. So I think they feel that friendship makes it something more than just another festival."

"From when our festival starts Friday evening until Sunday night there's not any time," Maness adds, "no matter what time of day or night, that you can't find a good jam session going. That says something in itself, they're there to have fun. It has a snowball effect."

"I'd say we've probably helped the festival more than it's helped us. We're getting a lot of people from all over the country, more and more states each year and more people from each state, coming to our festival. And I know they're coming to see some of the name acts that we're featuring, but they're also coming to see us, because we became hard and fast friends over the years. They want to make an excursion and they know that we've got a nice park and they're going to see a lot

of their friends as well as hear the music."

About a month after the initial Bass Mountain Festival, Jeff Miller, who then played lead guitar with Wilson and the Manesses, secured the group a gig at a birthday party. They so impressed the guest of honor that he hired the five to play Sunday nights at the Best Western Motel in Burlington. For that purpose they adopted the name, Bass Mountain Boys.

"We hadn't played much before that, except for a few parties and coffee breaks," Maness admits. "We used to do a lot of small shows, people who didn't understand bluegrass, on a very, very inadequate sound system. And all we were doing, though we didn't realize it at that time, was basically giving bluegrass music a bad name. Every group has had to do this to a certain point, you're doing the best you could do. When you've got people watching your show and they don't understand bluegrass anyway and your sound system's inadequate and you're in a learning process of the very basics of the music, you're actually giving the music somewhat of a bad image to those people. You have to start out in those situations, but I'm glad to see that bands are by and large getting themselves tighter and sound systems are improving and the younger bands starting out now are, to me, doing a better job than the earlier bands did starting out, say, ten years ago. I think that's helping the bluegrass image."

For eighteen months the neophyte Bass Mountain Boys held forth in front of capacity crowds each Sunday at the Best Western. All holding full-time jobs, they saved their musical earnings to finance an album and a bus. "We thought," John Maness notes, "if this is the way it is, this is a good way to make a living." Successfully making the transition from that kind of naivete to a very real world outlook on the bluegrass industry without losing their enthusiasm and high spirits forms a cornerstone to the Bass Mountain Boys' growth.

At the end of June, 1981, a much more experienced musician, Johnny Ridge, joined the band, primarily because he wanted to learn the fiddle with a working outfit. "They were good enough to hire me and pay me to learn the fiddle," he recalls.

Ridge's father, Curry Ridge, had performed for years, including the night Johnny was born, with the Southland Playboys on Barefoot Johnny Thornton's popular variety show on WTVD-TV in Durham, North Carolina. After learning guitar and

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mandolin from his dad, the younger Ridge joined the Camp Springs Boys, who included Alan O'Bryant, currently with the Nashville Bluegrass Band, Pat Smith and his brother Terry Smith, who spent a number of years with Wilma Lee Cooper and more recently with the Osborne Brothers. After his stint as their bassman, he played guitar with Rebel Records artists Roy McMillan & the High Country Boys and for Union Station (no connection with Alison Krauss' group) on whose 1981 album [Leather LBG-8104] both he and his composition, "Carolina Calling Me," appear, as does Kenneth Berrier, later of Summer Wages and Vernon Allred, today bassist of ASH&W. One to three good traditional sounding songs composed or co-written by Ridge seem to appear on every Bass Mountain Boys' project.

In 1981, the Bass Mountain Boys attained their first significant exposure on the festival circuit. Early on the band used a certain amount of trade out dates with other playing promoters to break the group into new markets. "The first five years from 1978, until 1982, maybe 1983, the festival helped us tremendously," Maness contends, "because we did some trading of dates with other groups that promoted festivals. So that gave us exposure. That helped us a great deal. It helped put our name on the map, so to speak. Since the early to mid-80s, it's pretty well been on our own recognition, rather than the festival . . . It has been a definite help, but if you're going to play professional music and you're going to do it right, you're going to have to have audience appeal. If we're playing Hugo, Oklahoma, or we're playing Pennsylvania or we're playing in lower Florida, having a bluegrass festival in central North Carolina, doesn't do you any good. If you get invited back into that part of the country, it's because they liked what you've done."

Their bookings increased steadily throughout the 1980s, despite the slow decrease in the number of festivals during the mid-decade. A great leap forward occurred in 1982, when the Bass Mountain Boys moved from local band to a successfully regional outfit that had established its ability to draw fans in the markets where they had received exposure. Florida, Ohio, Maryland, and Oklahoma, have developed into especially strong areas for the quintet.

"'82 was a super successful season for the group, because we stayed busy all year," recalls Maness. "We worked some great festivals and seven days at the [Knoxville] World's

Fair." Jeff Miller, however was no longer aboard, having departed in the fall of 1981. Ridge, Wilson and the three Maness Brothers completed their second album, "Wood And Stone" [Outlet STLP-1034]. Wilson and Ridge composed two of the selections, including the title cut, while Wilson and Joel Maness wrote a third original.

Each as owner and operator of successful businesses, John Maness and Wilson brought the experience with long range planning and money management that allowed them to handle the business end of the Bass Mountain Boys as just that, serious business.



John Maness

Mostly with well established careers, the band members have used lessons learned from life as an advantage in presenting the band. As serious semi-professionals, they have also had the edge of not having to depend on the music for a living nor to worry where their next meal was coming from.

Dilling asserts, "This is where having a job helps. If picking was all we were doing, if we turned down a date because of something in the family, we'd lose money."

The Bass Mountain Boys, moreover, haven't succumbed the trap of depending on their musical abilities alone to entertain the crowd. From early days the Bass Mountain Boys have entertained. They've presented a good time on stage, drawing out the personalities of each member and shared the high spirits with the audience. The group recombines, changes instruments and vocal parts, mixes in

humour with bittersweet recitations, in short, puts on a show. Bass Mountain style is not a deep musical statement; it's a variety of basic bluegrass presented with a heck of a lot of fun.

"We will continue to promote and play on a part-time basis," John Maness asserts. "We all have families and careers and have no intention of becoming a full-time band. The Seldom Scene did away with the myth that you *have* to be a full-time band."

The Bass Mountain Boys are regular folks, friendly and out going. They've forged a genuine, direct personal bond with members of the audiences.

"Another reason that's helped us, especially in the last half a dozen years," according to Maness, "is the fact that we get out and visit, associate and talk with our fans. We've watched the Lewis Family. They've been a prime example of that over the years. This thing of doing your show and hiding back in the bus—bluegrass fans don't like that. They're not used to it and they're not going to buy your product and like your show if you're not going to visit with them on a one to one basis. And that's one thing that we always try to do. We're all healthy eaters and everywhere we go we've got some moms who do a bunch of good home cooking . . . And they're not doing it for any other reason than that we became friends over the years. They like to do it and we like for them to do it."

The 1983 festival summer, saw the release of an all gospel project, "I'll Sing For The Lord." At the end of the season Joel Maness left the group due to a new job. Mike Aldridge of Saxapahaw, North Carolina, filled in on mandolin, but felt he should honor his long-standing commitment to A.L. Wood & the Smokey Ridge Boys, with whom he had been playing since 1976. Allen Mills of the Lost & Found soon steered them toward Greg Trafidlo, who had moved to the Roanoke, Virginia, area following a five year stint with the Greater Chicago Bluegrass Band.

Trafidlo accelerated the vocal maturation of the Bass Mountain Boys by adding high leads and more versatility to their arrangements. "Greg's vocal range is a whole lot higher than anyone who had sung with us before," Ridge remarks. "We could get closer to Monroe's high, lonesome sound."

As the group's sound progressed, the members could think in terms of defining their own style of bluegrass music. "We want anybody who hears the first few notes to know who it is,"

Ridge continues. "We're doing it the way we like it and the way we feel it . . . I think our sound is more traditionally oriented bluegrass, but still again we all like traditional country music. It's a mix of the two. One thing about our music is the phrasing of our words. Most of us, Mike Wilson, Mike Aldridge and myself, were all raised within fifteen miles of each other. So that regional accent causes our voices to blend better than a whole lot of other groups, where one man might come from Detroit and another might come from St. Louis.

"As far as what we're striving for in our sound, what I'd like to see us do is just keep a sound that is unique so that when you turn the radio on you know it's the Bass Mountain Boys. You can't make it sounding like Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, or Bill Monroe, or Flatt & Scruggs. You can do some of their obscure material that people have forgotten about and do it the way that you think you can do it to the best of your ability, if you keep that as a goal, eventually you'll have a sound that is unique to the group that you are a part of. As soon as you hear the unit start, we want you to know that that is the Bass Mountain Boys."

Toward that end various Bass Mountain Boys have written songs, searched old recordings and song books and adapted southern gospel material to their traditional bluegrass sound.

"I write some of it. Not much. What little bit I can," says a modest Ridge. "Most of the time we maybe hear something on the radio, a country song or go back and listen to old tapes of country recordings or Opry shows or older records and things like that and pick what would suit us.

"Another thing is," Dilling points out, "we get more and more songs sent to us by songwriters and we listen to every one of them."

Adds Wilson, "We make a conscious effort to keep an open mind, but sometimes when you hear a song, you know that one will work in our group."

By the beginning of the 1985 festival season, John was the only Maness left in the Bass Mountain Boys. Steve Dilling of Cary, North Carolina, replaced Jeff Maness on banjo. Dilling, whose parents Don and Linda have fed many a bluegrass musician, had spent the 1984 season traveling the road as part of Rebel artists Summer Wages. Soon Trafidlo left the group. This time Aldridge joined on a permanent basis. Until Maness retired from the bass duties, this unit of Bass

Mountain Boys provided the stability necessary for growth.

Aldridge's rapid fire mandolin and cutting tenor and high lead vocals provided yet another new dimension to the Bass Mountain style. His lead singing on "I'm Back In Circulation Once Again," a 1950s sounding song written by Ridge and Gordon Loy, off the 1987 album "All Together Now," gave the group its first significant radio play.

The major turning point musically came, Maness says, "In 1985, when Mike Aldridge came with us. We knew what we wanted, but we didn't know

how to get it. When we got Mike, we had the tenor voice that complimented the other voices. The harmony just began clicking. While we had harmony in the other groups, we didn't have what we wanted. We have always been a unit group. When Mike came it made a definite difference. It was the same thing when Jeff left. Jeff was a super banjo player and a good singer, but Steve's banjo playing and drive complements the group better.

"We'd like to improve the quality of the shows. I think that we're beginning to get pretty well recognized as our own sound. When you start hearing

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younger, upcoming groups doing your songs, you feel like you reached a certain achievement in this brand of music. That's happening some with us now.

"I think there's going to be a market in this music for a long time to come for a part-time band that is still doing a professional show," Maness observes. "I feel like there's going to be more of a market for that type than there's going to be full-time bands. The young people that are coming up in this music are by and large far more educated than the people who were taking up this music 25, 30, 40 years ago. So they're going to be making a better living, but this is still going to be their primary hobby and interest. So they're going to be able to do a good job playing music and still have another career. We're happy with that situation."

But that doesn't mean that the Bass Mountain Boys, like all touring musicians, don't have to pay a price for success. Maness admits, "We sacrifice a lot. Our families sacrifice a lot. They know we've been doing it so long and that we enjoy it so much, that if we didn't do it, we'd probably be miserable to live with. So we don't hear



The Bass Mountain Boys, L-R: Johnny Ridge, Mike Wilson, Steve Dilling, Mike Street, Mike Aldridge and John Maness

too much static about it. So we try to work it out and work our dates out."

"We get support from home. All of us do," Wilson insists. "I don't think most people give wives and kids at home their due. Because they sacrifice more than we do. We're out here because we love to do it. A lot of times that means working extra hours on our job on a day to day basis to

make up for when we're going to be off. So we're away from the family because of that and we're away from them because we pick. If you didn't have that support from at home, you'd be in a mental state of confusion. They deserve so much more credit than they get."

The family-music-career triangle also imposes limits on the band's activities. Maness explains, "we've had to actually turn down a couple of far out festivals, good festivals and good financially for us. It gets to the point that you can't stay out but so much and keep everything going. I never thought in the early years that we'd ever be able to turn down a date and certainly don't like to, but it's just being feasible. For instance, we can't take but so many trips to Oklahoma this year.

Wilson acknowledges, "We can increase the quality of the shows we do. That's what we're working on now, to improve the quality of the festivals we play and the shows that we do, rather than the quantity.

"There's a delicate balance to maintain the positive mental attitude. We love what we're doing, but to know that you're having fun does not excuse you to take it for granted and become mechanical. If we can attain longevity and still maintain that balance, I think that's a goal that a whole lot of bands never achieve."

Maintaining those balances among music, family and jobs, between on stage performance and off stage friendliness, among the members of the band and, most of all, between fun and work, forms the essence of Bass Mountain style.



BLUEGRASS UNLIMITED

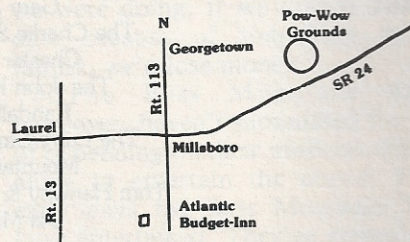
PENINSULA **Third Annual**  
**BLUEGRASS INC. Bluegrass Festival**  
**June 1 & 2, 1991**  
**(Saturday & Sunday)**  
 Pow-Wow Grounds, Millsboro, Delaware

- STEVENS FAMILY (Hampton, TN—1&2)
- ALVIN BREEDEN & THE VIRGINIA CUT-UPS (Earlsville, VA—1&2)
- SKYSTONE (Fairfax, VA—1)
- BLUE MOUNTAIN GANG (Fleetwood, PA—1)
- ONE WAY TICKET (Closter, NJ—1&2)
- REKINDLED (Salisbury, MD—2)
- Plus others

**Showtimes:** Saturday 12 til midnight; Sunday 11 til 3 **Gates Open:** Noon Fri.  
**Prices:** Sat. \$15.00; Sun. \$7.00; Under 12 free if accompanied by adult.

Rough camping only: \$3.00 per person per day. Large parking area, security patrolled, bring lawn chairs, cover available in case of rain, concessions. NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR LOSS OF PROPERTY AND/OR ACCIDENTS. Motorcycles left at gate. No drugs. No alcohol in concert area.

**Local Motel:** Atlantic Budget Inn  
 302-934-6711 (mention festival for discount.)  
**Festival directions:** Take Rt. 24 East off Rt. 113 at Millsboro, go approximately 5 miles, signs will be posted. (Beaches nearby.)



**FOR MORE INFO. OR TICKETS, PLEASE WRITE TO:**  
**PBI, P.O. Box 2, Laurel, DE 19956**  
**or call 302-875-3582 or 238-7421**