

IBMA

Bluegrass People At Work

by Art Menius

In the February issue of *Bluegrass Unlimited* Richard K. Spottswood presented a guest editorial that, like so much of his writing, is a model of thoughtful, constructive criticism. In his discussion of the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) he offers helpful suggestions, presents several positive points, and poses a number of very pertinent questions.

The purpose of reviews, and Spottswood's editorial is in many ways a review, is to provide an objective view. The drawback is that the reviewer does not know the inside story. He must guess at intentions and then comment on them. As temporary Executive Director of IBMA, I should like to both thank member Spottswood for his critical commentary and to respond as an IBMA insider.

IBMA is a result not of prosperity within the bluegrass music industry, but a lack thereof. IBMA actually runs counter to many of the dangerous trends Spottswood apprehends in the creation of IBMA.

The Country Music Association came about in order to make country a popular music, as a side effect it created crossover stars such as Parton and Rogers. In so doing country music lost its very countryness. IBMA has no intention of doing the same to, or for, bluegrass. Bluegrass was commercial in the context of 1946; it is not in the context of 1986 tastes. To make it so, one would have to strip it of everything that makes it bluegrass. IBMA is bluegrass people, and

we have no desire to destroy that which we love.

Nor do we want economics to force our brightest young stars to enter the country music or any other field. IBMA wants to create an atmosphere in which a top bluegrass musician can earn a comfortable income by playing music for the people, receive the respect and attention that extraordinary skill at both entertaining and making music deserve, and feel secure that he or she will be taken care of in old age or infirmity by the industry to which he or she has given a career.

IBMA does want to expand the market for bluegrass music, but not willy nilly, and not by sacrificing the soul that makes bluegrass wonderful. We perceive that there are several million people looking for American family-style entertainment. We see in the success of Windham Hill Records that a sizeable minority of record buyers are sick of pop music. We observe the hundreds of thousands who watch the "Fire On The Mountain" TV show and listen to "A Prairie Home Companion" and similar public radio offerings. We see faces at urban nightclubs and concert hall appearances for bluegrass that do not appear at bluegrass festivals.

In short, we know that there exists a large number of people who are right for bluegrass. In IBMA we are pooling our resources and talents so as to publicize what we have, and to devise a marketing strategy that will bring these good folks into bluegrass. How else can our sound survive?

IBMA is not here to define, direct, or corrupt bluegrass music. Bluegrass

fans have always chosen, and will continue to choose, what they want to hear. Bluegrass music can be defined only in the heart, not the head. Any concrete definition either is so vague as to be useless or so restrictive as to be unworkable. The ecumenical approach this magazine has taken provides a worthy model. We must have the older style groups to maintain our heritage, and we must have those who experiment to keep the music alive. That Spottswood so easily labels other styles with other names shows that those of us in bluegrass know what bluegrass is.

IBMA represents the entire bluegrass industry, local, regional, and national. A careful, well ordered growth in the popularity of bluegrass music will benefit those of us who work for and play bluegrass music at all levels. Besides, IBMA is a representative institution, and there are a lot more local and regional acts than big time bands. All they need to do is join, so that their voices can be heard.

The very creation of IBMA signifies that we consider ourselves a distinctive form of music. We realize that bluegrass historically is a sub-genre of country music, but we also know that those of us in bluegrass must stand up for our own. We are a separate institution from CMA, but we can work with them when it benefits bluegrass music.

Nashville has been our base of operations in our organizational infancy simply out of convenience. Many of the bluegrass people who created the impetus for IBMA live in the Nashville area and secured free meeting sites for our planning session there. Already we are geographically diffuse with a board chairman based near Washington, D.C., an executive director living in central North Carolina, a research foundation in Texas, and a treasurer in Nashville. In a short time, moreover, we probably will have an announcement that IBMA's headquarters will be moving to what Spottswood terms a "more appropriate" site.

IBMA is not here to change the music or the people who support it. What we want to change is great musicians starving for their art, shoddy business practices, poor or no promotion, negative public images, second rate productions, and shoe string budgets. IBMA strives to be, as Spottswood suggests, an umbrella for bluegrass people to solve our problems together, to end the self-defeating infighting that has gone on for forty years too long. All we need for success is your help.

