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THE NASHVILLE BLUEGRASS BAND



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THE NASHVILLE BLUEGRASS BAND'S AMERICAN LANCAO

On stage at the Nacogdoches [Texas] Summer Music Festival the Nashville Bluegrass Band energetically demonstrates their impressive vocal chops, sizzling bluesy song selection, and tasteful instrumental work. They project enough bluegrass roots soul to warm the heart of any Stanley Brothers fan, yet they do so with thoroughly modern sensibilities. The audience responds with requisite enthusiasm. Big deal, you say. So you've seen the Nashville quintet win audiences at Winterhawk, Winfield, and Wind Gap, in fact, everywhere you've seen them play. This is the deal: the day before, the Nashville Bluegrass Band had giggered at a July Fourth picnic for the American Embassy in Beijing, China, as in Red. And the rest of the story is that after an exhausting trans-Pacific flight followed by an airlift halfway across our continent to the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, the band found their bus blocked in by cars. Not only were the police uncooperative, they began to hassle the victims since the autos had been parked legally. The Nashville Bluegrass Band rented a station wagon and hustled to Nacogdoches. "I must admit we're a little bit out of breath," confesses banjoman Alan O'Bryant. "It's like being in a waterfall." And a powerful waterfall at that.

The June/July 1986 China junket marked the group's second anniversary. In that time the Nashville Bluegrass Band has played most of the choice bluegrass festivals in America, recorded two acclaimed albums for Rounder, taped a video for Central Sun, appeared on the Nashville Network's *New Country* and *Fire On The Mountain* TV shows, and toured Europe, China, and Japan.

It seems like yesterday that Mark Hembree was trying to sell a copy of the Dreadful Snakes' "Snakes Alive" [Rounder 0177] to this guy who had already bought a copy from Bela Fleck.

By Art Menius

Nonetheless, the blonde bassman pitched the record to him for the fourth time in the course of that June 1984 Bean Blossom festival.

Hembree had grown up in Wisconsin and spun bluegrass platters on a radio show in Green Bay. Even though it meant tearing himself away from his beloved Milwaukee Brewers baseball club, Hembree joined Monroe Doctrine. This was the second version of the midwestern group. The first included Hot Rize's Charles Sawtelle; the second Danny Weiss, now of Tony Trischka & Skyline. In 1979 he replaced Stephen (a/k/a Randy) Davis on bass with Bill

Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys and as a member of the Blue Grass Quartet. Hembree's recording credits include "Snakes Alive," Monroe's "Master of Bluegrass" [MCA 5214] and "Bill Monroe & Friends" [MCA 5435], and rock/country/folk star Neil Young's "Old Ways" [Geffen 24068]. That Sunday in Brown County marked his final day with Bill Monroe.

"I'm joining a group called the Nashville Bluegrass Band with Alan O'Bryant, Pat Enright, and Mike Compton," Hembree volunteered.

"Oh, a continuation of the Bluegrass Band?"

"No, this is a new group. Alan's the only one who was in that band."

Alan O'Bryant came to Nashville from Reidsville, North Carolina (that's where banjo pickers come from, witness Allen Shelton) in 1974 "under the dual auspices of going to engineering school and playing music," O'Bryant recalls. "I lived with my two cousins, Billy and Terry Smith. I played with them for a while, then I went to work with James Monroe. I worked with him for four years, really just as a sideman as well as getting to be close to Bill. He had me pegged. He knew right where I was from. There wasn't no mistaking I was from the country, and before too long Bill and I were friends.



Fred Burton

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"I did get to hang out with Bill a lot, and he taught me a lot just by watching him. And I learned a lot of stuff that he showed me . . . I watched him write a lot of tunes. I think that part of Monroe really permeated my being, the creative part of Monroe, the part of him that I think everybody is in awe of . . . I love Bill. I think he's great, great enough that I've dedicated my life to doing this. Not for him, but because I like to play it."

Leaving the younger Monroe, O'Bryant joined the Front Porch String Band, meeting John Starling through them. He played rhythm guitar and sang harmony on Starling's 1982 "Waiting On A Southern Train" album [Sugar Hill 3724].

"When I left Front Porch, I was around Nashville and had some bands of my own. Pat [Enright] and I put together a band. Then after that, the Bluegrass Band came along." That outfit included O'Bryant on guitar/lead vocals, Monroe alumnus Butch Robins picking banjo, Blaine Sprouse, now of the Osborne Brothers, on fiddle, Dobroist Ed Dye, and David Sebring on bass. Their only album, "Another Saturday Night" [Voyager 330-S], garnered rave reviews in 1983, but not enough dates were forthcoming to sustain the band, O'Bryant, meanwhile, has become established among Nashville's acoustic sessionmen, recording on projects for Carl Jackson, Peter Rowan, Robins, Sprouse, Bill & James Monroe, and Marty Stuart.

"After the Bluegrass Band there was sort of a year of limbo, where it was, 'I would like to do this with the right bunch of guys.'"

At Wind Gap, Pennsylvania guitarist and lead singer Pat Enright sprawls across the floor of the bus the Nashville Bluegrass Band had purchased in the spring of '86 from a group whose

name, the Soundmasters, is still painted on its sides. Although the Soundmasters left their name, they seemed to have taken most of the bus' furnishings.

"Alan had this offer of some work," Enright explains. "We did this thing called 'Grand Ole Country Music,' and Minnie Pearl headlined it . . . It seemed like it was a good time to put something together and see what would happen."

Like O'Bryant, Indiana native Enright had come to Nashville in 1974, but from the opposite direction. "I lived in San Francisco for about four years from 1970 to 1974. I was in a band called Phantoms of the Opry. I moved to Nashville because I wanted to get closer to what I was trying to do." Soon he joined the circle of regulars at the then new and original Station Inn.

"That was really popular—great jam sessions. It wasn't so much bands coming in to perform like the Station Inn is now. It was just kind of a jam club. There were great combinations of musicians. I feel fortunate to have been in on that. I met just about everybody, with the exception of Stuart [Duncan], at the Station Inn."

By 1979 Enright had joined Tasty Licks, which then included Jack Tottle, currently with WETS-FM in Johnson City, Tennessee, Mark Schatz, now bassist for the Tony Rice Unit, and New Grass Revival's Bela Fleck. Enright's bluesy tendencies are apparent on a number of the tunes on the Tasty Licks LP "Anchored to the Shore" [Rounder 0120]. He also appears on Fleck's album "Crossing the Tracks" [Rounder 0121].

Enright then joined Hembree, Sprouse, and Fleck in the Dreadful Snakes, the part-time super group that also includes Jerry Douglas and Roland White (See *BU* June 1985). The Nashville Bluegrass Band has added several

DEDE WYLAND



Photo by: Peter Kumble

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BLUEGRASS GOES TO CHINA

By Penny Case

When word first came that the Great Wall Sheraton Hotel in Beijing, People's Republic of China, might want the Nashville Bluegrass Band to perform at a 10-day American Festival they planned for summer, 1986, the band and their manager, Keith Case, were... well, they were shocked. China? Play bluegrass in China? Certainly no one had done *that* before. What an honor. What a thrill. What an adventure!

But was it true? The only person who could answer that question worked at the hotel in Beijing. Whatever day it is in Tennessee, it is the next day in China, and the Chinese working day begins after most of America's working day ends, so Case was forced to wait, albeit impatiently, for the appropriate hour. When at last he was able to place the call, it took a while to get through, but soon there he was, sitting in his own living room talking to a woman just beginning her working day in China. Keith Case is not a man easily impressed by the miracle of modern telephone communications. He spends his working life on the telephone, using it to book his artists not only in this country but throughout Europe, in Japan, in Canada and South America. No big deal. But China? Now, *that's* a big deal.

The news was promising. Yes, the hotel was very interested in the band, but needed more information. Off went reviews, albums, performance videos, even a special advance copy of their new Rounder album, "Idle Time." Then there was nothing to do but wait some more. After all, there's no such thing as overnight delivery between Nashville, USA and Beijing, China.

To make a long wait short, when word came from China it was the



Keith Case

word everyone wanted to hear: Yes! The hotel loved what they saw and heard, and would be pleased if the Nashville Bluegrass Band would be the focal point of their American Festival.

The two-year-old Great Wall Hotel, a 1007 room luxury high-rise catering to an international business and diplomatic clientele, is a \$75 million joint venture between American and Chinese companies. For the American Festival, co-sponsored by several major U.S. corporations, the hotel took on a truly western flavor, offering American food, service people in cowboy and cowgirl attire and various special presentations, as well as the very popular nightly performances by the Nashville Bluegrass Band.

Negotiations and arrangements began immediately, but it was not a simple matter of agreeing on details and issuing a contract. Not that there were any disagreements. On the con-

trary, all parties involved had pretty much the same goals in mind. It's just that doing business across such vast geographical, political and cultural distances is challenging. By the time the very last details were completed, the band had been back home in the USA from the China tour for two weeks.

With the China trip about to become a reality, it was only natural to arrange a stopover in Japan. Bluegrass has developed such a devoted and enthusiastic following in Japan that it would be downright unfriendly to be in the neighborhood and not drop in, so Case contacted his favorite Japanese concert promoters and set shows for Hiroshima, Osaka and Tokyo.

Since the band was due on stage at Nacogdoches, Texas, within hours of their return from the Far East, it only made sense to leave their bus at the Dallas airport to which they would return. Pat and Alan would drive the bus from Nashville to Dallas and leave from there, while Stuart, Mark and Mike would leave from Los Angeles, to be reunited in Japan. Sounds simple enough. So off they went, with Pat and Alan allowing several extra hours for the trip 'just in case.' Good that they did, for mechanical problems plagued them every step of the way and they arrived at the airport check-in desk a mere 15 minutes before departure.

Meanwhile, at LAX, the rest of the band were just getting settled for takeoff, happily anticipating the adventure ahead, when disaster struck. Actually, it wasn't disaster that struck. It was a forklift, the kind used to load luggage aboard planes, and what it struck was the plane three fifths of Nashville Bluegrass Band had just boarded. Of course, the airline

"serpentine" tunes to their live repertoire including the Louvin Brothers' "Cash on the Barrelhead" and "Who's That Knockin' at My Door," a strong blues penned by Enright.

Mandolinist and baritone singer Mike Compton had also been picking around Nashville for some time, spending three and one-half years at the Bluegrass Inn with Hubert Davis. The Meridian, Mississippi (another bluesy connection and Jimmie Rodgers link) native's stunningly Monrovia mandolin was featured on three Hubert Davis and the Season Travelers albums on PHD

Records. His compositions "Monroeabilia" and "Idle Time" provide the instrumental highlights on the first two NBB albums. In fact, their July 1986 Rounder release takes "Idle Time" as its title.

In China Compton discovered Blue Grass brand cigarettes, which he reports too bitter to smoke. The Chinese name for bluegrass transliterates to "Lancao."

Hembree tries to relax on the 'Soundmasters' floor, then takes a place among the conventional bus seats. "I had played with these guys before and at the time I left Bill Monroe we were looking at a pretty good little chunk of work.

When Alan and Pat called about doing it I didn't hesitate because I had played with Pat, of course, in the Dreadful Snakes and around town with Alan at times."

Unlike so many new groups, the Nashville Bluegrass Band seemed to click from the start. "I think it's the mutual desire to have a band where we can all stretch out," opines O'Bryant while the rest of the aggregation listens. "Where we can grow and develop and have a lot of individual, eclectic feelings. Anything that anybody wants to do they can more or less do.

had no intention of letting a wounded plane take off across the Pacific Basin. Yes, they most certainly would provide inconvenienced passengers with an airworthy replacement, but not until the next morning. International travel being what it is, the boys in the band had no alternative but to wait, and they arrived in Hiroshima just two hours before the first show.

The Japanese tour was a first class, trouble-free experience. To their delight, NBB discovered they already had a following. Fans brought over four times as many albums to be autographed as the band actually sold at the gigs, a sure sign their music and records had preceeded their personal appearances. Their only regret was they could not find a practical way to bring home any of the incredibly artistic plastic food "sculptures" for which the Japanese have become famous! Then it was off to Narita Airport to board a plane for China and the unknown.

We join the band several weeks later at a large corner table in a Chinese Restaurant in Nashville as they collectively share with us some impressions and rambling recollections of their adventures at the Great Wall and beyond.

"The airport in Beijing was very stark, dusty and dark. It's like something out of the fifties, with bare walls and benches. There were chickens, pigs, people with baskets of melons walking around. When we got there we didn't have any work visas (remember those s-l-o-w arrangements!) so they weren't going to let us into the country. We were expecting somebody to meet us there and take care of us, but there wasn't anybody. So Alan said 'I'm going to find out what's going on' and he walked up to this guy and said 'Excuse me, we're this group...' and the guy said 'Oh, group. Over there' and set him over to the area where they put tour groups. Well, that didn't

work, so we walked up to the visa registration counter. There were about 10 guards—very stern-looking people in uniforms. They wanted our 'invitation' and we didn't have an invitation. We were frantically cutting up publicity photos to stick on our visa applications when we realized we had a telex from the hotel to Keith [Case], and we ended up showing them that as our invitation.

"We weren't really getting anywhere with that, when they said, 'You're musicians. Could you do a program?' Well, we didn't have any of our instruments yet, so we sang as a quartet; did a couple of gospel songs. All those stern guards broke into smiles and applause! People came from all over the airport to listen. They loved it. We even did an encore. Several of those guards listen to Voice of America on shortwave every day, and one of them hummed 'Yankee Doodle.' He said 'Do you know da da da da da da . . .?' Anyway, after we did that, those stamps started stamping and forms started flying and we got outta there real quick!"

To everyone's relief, representatives from the hotel, who had been detained outside the security area, were waiting for them, and took wonderful care of the band throughout their stay.

The Great Wall Sheraton Hotel is an imposing modern structure in sharp contrast to the city around it. Many of the homes "had dirt floors, stone or brick walls that were stacked so they wouldn't fall down. A good portion of them didn't even have any mortar between the bricks. Lots of houses didn't even have heat. The people would just pile up coal on the floor and light it in a portion of the house that didn't have a roof. Many, many people live this way. We imagine that the higher up in the party you are, the better accommodations you have, but not the ordinary working Joe. This certainly wasn't the Worker's

Paradise. It's pretty grim. And on a lot of the land they do three crops a year, and they do it all by hand. They build roads by hand, too. We saw very little mechanization.

"The city is really dusty. There are lots of unpaved streets, sidewalks and yards. They're just bare dirt. You go down the street and see people sweeping all the time. There isn't any grass, because during the Cultural Revolution Beijing (formerly Peking) had a serious problem with sparrows. To get rid of the sparrows they decided to get rid of the insects so the birds wouldn't have anything to eat. So they figured out the way to get rid of the bugs was to rip up all the grass, so they ripped up *all* the grass. That didn't really work, so they all got together and made a bunch of noise and drove away the birds, and then of course there was a huge insect growth. But they just denuded the city. Now it's almost like a desert city.

"They've started building lots of high-rises, but none of them are finished. It's weird to be looking out of your hotel room and all you see are medium-high, not-finished skyscrapers with bamboo scaffolding all the way up, and big canvas sacks suspended from the scaffolding with guys sleeping in them. Up above the tree line it's like a ghost town, even though down below it's a beehive."

Outside the hotel, the band was a bit overcome by the powerful aroma of Beijing. "You kinda have to put it together," says Alan delicately. "Everybody eats a lot of garlic. And, you have to pay to take a bath. And nobody makes any money!" Nor is there an extensive sewer system, which takes on significance when one realizes there are public toilets everywhere. During NBB's visit, the weather was hot and humid in the extreme. A memorable scent.

Garlic is, indeed, omnipresent. One Chinese citizen unknowingly made a lasting impression as he

"Just the logistics involved in trying to have a band of any kind are really overwhelming. So it's really a dream—for us to be able to do this and just be what we want to be and have folks like it and not have to work under the bossman system. Not to have to prostitute our music. Not to have to do something just to make money. It's a struggle to do what we do and try to make it work and fit in somehow in a society that's geared around big time entrepreneurs, and small time businessmen that are struggling like we are, and the people that are punching the clock."

"Not too many people," Hembree interjects, "get to do what they want to do for a living; what they really want to do."

"That's what makes it work," resumes O'Bryant. "I think everybody has that desire and that mutual respect for each other. What makes it work for us, too, in another way thus far is just really a common ground musically. That's really important. As far as what we want to do with this band, everybody's in a pretty tight focus. We're trying to do that whole thing: Be from Nashville. Be the Nashville

Bluegrass Band, play bluegrass, and be the hometown boys.

"Businesswise and professionally as entertainers, the name's very important. If you hear the name the Nashville Bluegrass Band, if you're a bluegrass fan it's going to conjure a certain image in your mind. If you're not a bluegrass fan... it's an instant image. OK, these guys are from Nashville and they play bluegrass. It's just a real matter of fact, short statement."

After release of the Nashville Bluegrass Band's mighty debut album, "My Native Home" [Rounder 0212], the

hauled his garlic down the street, carrying so much that nothing was visible except his head and the bottom of his bicycle wheels, his body and bike frame totally obscured by his pungent cargo.

And then there's the watermelon. "You couldn't believe how many watermelons there are in that city. They were having a watermelon rind crises when we were there. They had an article in the paper every day about the crisis and what should be done about it, because the rinds were just rotting in the streets. The paper would talk about how they must move forward and eliminate the scourge of the raging imperialist watermelon rind. 'We must make a great leap forward and learn from our mistakes.' The articles were actually written that way, geared toward that kind of propaganda."

The boys in the band discovered wonderful things, too, many of them 2-3,000 years old, such as the Forbidden City with its 9,999 buildings and endless art treasures. "There is no picture, there are no words that can describe what the Summer Palace and the Forbidden City are like. There is *no way*. There's one solid piece of rock that weighs 22 tons, and they've carved this huge sculpture of two dragons playing with a pearl. They laid it between the stairs the emperor went up on the right, and the stairs he went down on the left. It's like 30 feet long. It came from a mountain far away from the city. When they moved it, they dug canals and poured water for it. Then, in winter they walked down the road in front of it pouring water on the road so it would freeze and they could push the rock. There's stuff like that everywhere. It's unbelievable.

focus of the band was a bit cleaner. Produced by Fleck with Sprouse adding the fiddle, "My Native Home" returned to bluegrass roots to create a fresh contemporary sound. Bill Monroe and Jim Eanes met Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Jesse Winchester, and every listener emerged a winner. The blues, such a large component of Bill Monroe's music, had been returned to bluegrass. Hot Rize and the Johnson Mountain Boys had begun the soulful revival a few years before, but the Nashville Bluegrass Band made a great leap forward.

"Old time bluegrass really got to me," O'Bryant confesses. "A lot of this frantic stuff that makes people want to beat each other over the head with chairs, I never really did care too much about. A lot of that has given bluegrass a

"There's an enormous square. Tian'anmen Square, with 500,000 individually numbered concrete squares for people to stand on during rallies. It's in front of the reviewing stand we used to see on TV with Mao and the entire Politburo up there. That's right in front of the Forbidden City, right across from Mao's tomb. We were right there, having our picture made in front of Mao's picture, and we see this other guy over there. He's in shorts and has a People's hat on and so Mark asked him if he'd take a picture of us. Come to find out, he's a buddy of Charles Sawtelle [of Hot Rize]! Knew Charlie real good. He's a glass-blower, traveling the world."

While NBB introduced bluegrass to new and very appreciative ears, they also enjoyed some Chinese lively arts, including the state-supported China Song and Dance Company. "We wondered how someone gets into a group like that, and found out most of them get in through exams. But one guy had a really interesting story. He was orphaned in an earthquake, and he was in this camp, going through the streets hollering, trying to find his family, and somebody heard him and said they thought he'd have a good voice to be a singer.

"They saw us perform, and they'd never seen people play and sing at the same time. They were flabbergasted, and really curious. Pat said, 'Well, we don't have as many people in the United States. We have to do both!' They decided they were going to try to learn that approach, so in five years, who knows? They play a lot of South American music. The first song they played was 'La Cucaracha.' They were working on some other... Bolivian things. The accordion player played really Mexican music. Their

bad name. A lot of people took that as the showy, flashy part. I think people got tuned into one small part of what bluegrass is, and it sort of got sensationalized.

"What we try to do is a little broader approach to playing the music. We try to accomplish as much in the 45 minute program as we can get in there. We try to keep people's attention from drifting with something a little different in each song."

"We like a lot of blues. We tend to like things with a little edge to it, something you can get a piece of," Enright notes. "I think when we first got together that's the way it started to come out as far as the sound of the band. We really looked for material that fit that. We solicit a lot of material, like



(Spanish) pronunciation was perfect.

"We also got to see an acrobatic show. The best show I've seen in a long time. (Everyone agreed.) It was in one of these people's theaters, no air conditioning, just hot and smelly and it was great! They're unbelievable. They defy gravity."

Although numerous efforts by the hotel to arrange for NBB to visit a

Tommy Goldsmith [the Nashville *Tennessean* music staffer who contributes "Old Devil's Dream" to the "Idle Time" album.] A lot of tapes come our way. We try to be as fresh with our material as we can. We really don't like to put too many restrictions on ourselves. We have a built-in quality control that comes on automatically."

"We start out with a big list and just narrow it down to which ones we like the best; which ones work the best," adds O'Bryant.

Fiddler Stuart Duncan goes to the point: "Elimination."

"That's a good word. Bring one in. Try it out. Sometimes it just obviously doesn't work for us," agrees Enright.

"When we hit on a really good song," O'Bryant says, "the first couple of times



Keith Case

Chinese music school and perform at a people's theater were frustrated by red tape, the band was still able to play bluegrass for many Chinese, including the entire staff of the *China Daily* newspaper. With only two days to prepare, the staff arranged a lavish party for their American guests, including a 15-course feast in their honor.

"We rode over to their offices in a Red Flag limo. The whole interior was wood, and it looked like an early '60s Rolls Royce, only kinda classier looking than that in some strange way. It was a 'sure enough limo,' real Communist looking, even had curtains. Two or three of the older guys at the paper had been educated in American universities. They had been over here several times, and were very worldly. One of them had been to Nashville and Memphis. They really wanted to make us feel at ease, so they talked about different things in the states and all. They kept saying that Nashville people and Beijing people are really down to earth. We all ate together in a small room. The food was absolutely the best, like Chinese home cooking. (Unfortunately, space does not allow for their mouthwatering descriptions of individual dishes, but it would just make you hungry.) Then, after dinner we went into the other room to play for them. They were really excited, they *really* loved our music."

The next day's *China Daily* ran photos of the band on the front page, and from then on they were recognized everywhere they went, including by their fellow tourists visiting the Great Wall (the real one, not the hotel.)

"On opening night, a waitress came up and grabbed Mike's mandolin and said 'Oh, can I play?' and started playing some stuff, real weird upstroke stuff with her pick, and every once in a while she'd bang on a string and it would ring—this real weird Chinese style of playing. She usually played an instrument tuned like a mandolin—a moon harp. She was also a steel drum player, and she took us down to the 5th floor of the underground parking garage—it was

real dark and remote—where some of the employees had a steel drum band. There was a regular drum set and these big barrels that they make steel drums out of. And they played Chinese music. '500 Miles Away From Home' was one they like to play, and 'Red River Valley,' an orchestral, kind of classical arrangement of 'Red River Valley.' It was a tremendous sound. The intricate Chinese stuff they were doing was really neat and all in unison.

"Then we were up in our hotel room playing and one of us went to get something and noticed there'd be three or four floor guys (hotel employees) hanging around the door outside in the hall and they would turn and make out like they were doing something else, so the second time when we came back we propped the door open so they could hear what was going on, and that hall (for the distance of two rooms in each direction) was packed full of Chinese people—hotel staff. We were playing accordians and singing gospel songs and they were mind-blown. And, like everybody else, they were really friendly."

Given the opportunity, would Nashville Bluegrass Band return to China? Their answer was unanimous. "Absolutely yes. But next time we want to do real live shows for the Chinese people. Our biggest disappointment was being so confined to the hotel." But they were enthusiastic about the reception they received from those Chinese who did hear them.

"They like music, period, and they liked what we were doing a lot. They'd never seen it, or anything like it. And there was as much curiosity as there was delight."

we play it everybody senses that it's going to work. The lyrics; it has to have something in there. If it's a fun song it's got to be a fun song. If it's supposed to have something to it, it should have something to it and not be too jive. And the gospel songs, those are really the trickiest—to find something that musically and thematically fits you and your presentation."

Then the Nashville Bluegrass Band arranges as a team. "It takes a long time to figure out how a song can be done," Hembree says. "There are so many different ways to make it work. We just try to sit down and do that to all of them. If it works, it works. If it doesn't..."

By the summer of 1985, when the new group worked their first major festival dates, the Nashville Bluegrass

Band had added one time child prodigy Stuart Duncan on fiddle (see *BU*, November 1977). His right-on-the-money backup work incorporates more taste than most good fiddlers develop in a lifetime, yet he's only in his early 20s. That makes him the perfect fiddler for the Nashville Bluegrass Band. Their sound relies on teamwork, on every musician pulling together to make each song sound the best, regardless of who sings leads or plays the breaks. They are an interdependent unit, not rivals for the spotlight.

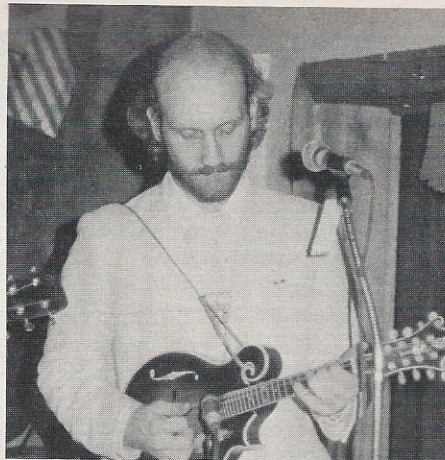
Duncan's interest in acoustic music "was just a matter of my dad being very persuasive with me and knowing the musical places in town to see people. He ran the sound system at a folk club (San Diego's In The Eye) that was booking a

lot of famous people before they were really that popular. I saw the Dillards with Byron Berline come in there. That was the first bluegrass I'd seen. Then after I saw some bands back here it made me really want to start playing bluegrass."

By the time he was twelve, Stuart played with John Hickman in the band Gold Rush. Thereafter, he joined the popular West Coast group Lost Highway, spent a year in bluegrass school at South Plains College, and returned to Lost Highway (see *BU*, June 1983). Deciding, like Enright, to get closer to the music, Duncan headed east becoming one of Larry Sparks' Lonesome Ramblers and appearing on the "Lonesome Guitar" album (Rebel 1633).



Stuart Duncan



Mike Compton



Alan O'Bryant



Pat Enright

Folk musician John Prine, best known in our world as the composer of "Paradise," used both O'Bryant, as a vocalist, and Duncan on mandolin and fiddle on his 1986 recording, "German Afternoons" (Oh Boy 003). Sam Bush and Roy Huskey, Jr. also contributed to the album.

"We were just going to cut three songs with Sam and Stuart," Prine said, "but it turned out so well we did the whole record. Stuart's fiddle floats in and out of everything." So impressed was Prine that he tried to lure Duncan to tour with him.

The group's acceptance was obvious as I walked up to the Nashville Bluegrass Band table at the 1986 Winterhawk Festival just in time to see them sell the last of the four boxes they had personally brought from the pressing plant of the brand new "Idle Time" album on Rounder.

"I'm really happy with how the new album came out," O'Bryant admits. "So far the first couple of shows we've taken it out to, it's sold out. We can't keep it."

Those sales no doubt resulted from their stage presentation and their tour de force debut platter. If the fans had already heard "Idle Time," it would have sold even faster. Featuring another sparkling production job by Fleck, the recording soulfully expands the base

they established on "My Native Home." How had the Nashville Bluegrass Band come so far, so fast?

"One of the things that we instinctively knew," O'Bryant explains, "was not having any contracts or any prior reputation—we were going pretty much from ground zero—there wouldn't be any way to really do what we wanted to do and be able to do a booking agent's job too.

"Of course, we started out with Ken Finkel in Milwaukee, and he did a really good job, I thought, of getting us established for a year. Then because of wanting Nashville representation, needing somebody close enough by that we could go see and deal with on a one to one basis, we decided to change over to Keith Case.

All their jet set accomplishments aside, the Nashville Bluegrass Band is far from satisfied, according to O'Bryant. "I think we have a long way to go there, because a lot of people haven't heard us. The real challenge that's before us is to repopularize what we do. After we get well established with the bluegrass audience, we've got to somehow gain some sort of mass appeal. Only a few artists in any kind of music are able to do that. Ultimately, that's our big challenge."

"I think most bluegrass people unnecessarily limit themselves as what they can do and how big they can be," Hembree interjects. "We want to try to reach big record sales instead of hanging back on the old paths."

They won't, however, sacrifice their soulful bluegrass sound, their achingly strong harmonies supported, rather than obscured by, the picking, and their incredible taste in material to reach those plateaus. They also refuse to be discouraged by the obstacles in their way.

"It's hard," Enright confesses, "especially when sometimes you don't get paid. Then comes winter, and the festivals shut down. There's not much club work. There used to be a little circuit of clubs you could play—bluegrass bars. These are fast disappearing. I think



Mark Hembree

Alan's right—what should happen in the winter is concerts, well promoted concert situations."

"I think we have a handle on a big change going on. There's kind of a folk boom happening," reports O'Bryant, who views the Nashville Bluegrass Band's path to success as a step by step process. "Right now we're really at the point of getting the prerequisites out of the way. We're having to do first things first—get a couple of seasons under our belt, a couple of albums under our belt. The band's just starting to mesh, to really come together. We're growing in that respect, too. Our plan at this point is to play for bigger audiences, bigger events, more events, and to get into more media than we're in right now."

A significant decision made by the Nashville Bluegrass Band is to concentrate on what they do best—make some of the freshest, yet traditional, bluegrass on the festival circuit today. "We have our job to do, and it takes everything we have to do it," says Enright. "If we try to do it all, something else has to suffer. We'd rather the music not slip, and that's what slips when you get involved in nuts and bolts things such as promotion, press releases, and calling radio stations.

"There's a market for this music. It's a matter of getting it to the people."

