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“It is an addiction. There is nothing like it. It’s that twang.”



DOUG DURAN/STAFF PHOTOS

John Green, left, of Fiddletown, and Ed Rossman, of El Sobrante, play four-string banjos with members of the Wineland Banjo Band in Livermore. The group is dedicated to preserving the instrument and its music.

FOUR STRINGS OR FIVE?

The banjo originated in Africa and most often had four strings until the 1830s, when a fifth, drone string was added. That instrument was most popular among bluegrass and folk musicians and is most often played with rolling finger-picking.

The four-string plectrum banjo was designed to cater to styles of music involving strummed chords and guitar-style flat-picking. It is featured in many early jazz and rag-time recordings and arrangements.

ONLINE EXTRA



Scan this code to see a photo gallery and watch a video of the Wineland Banjo Band in action, or view them together at <http://photos.mercurynews.com>.

The four-string gang

Their ranks are thinning, but Bay Area pickers try to keep a once-popular banjo alive

By Robert Jordan

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LIVERMORE — Jim Bottorff settles into a chair in his living room and a pack of his fellow four-string banjo aficionados pile in with him.

Some, like John Green, travel from as far away as Fiddletown, a 200-mile round trip to Livermore. Jim and Mary Raddatz make the trek from Sunnyvale, and Ed Rossman takes the weekly trip from El Sobrante to rehearse with the Wineland Banjo Band.

One by one, each banjo player follows Bottorff's foot-tapping lead until all eight banjos and two washboards are deep into "Coney Island Washboard."

"It's a freaking disease," said Green, 84,



This colorful design adorns the back of the banjo played by Jim Bottorff, of Livermore, founder of the Wineland Banjo Band.

the eldest member of the band, who has come each week since Bottorff founded the group in 2007. "It is an addiction. There is nothing like it. It's that twang."

For the past seven decades, Bottorff and a shrinking group of fellow four-string banjo players have been keeping alive an era of music with a sound that falls somewhere between twangy and percussive and that has long been forgotten by the mainstream.

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Banjo

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"The beauty of it is you can play it soft or loud, and you don't need electricity," said Bottorff, who started playing the banjo in the late 1950s and was one of a stable of banjo players in the 1970s at Cal's Steak House in San Rafael. "You don't need any power to get music out of it."

The four-string banjo was once rampant in the Bay Area during the 1960s and 1970s with more than 60 banjo groups and places in every corner of the region to enjoy the music.

Four-string heyday

While the five-string banjo has seen its popularity grow over the years thanks to the likes of Steve Martin, the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" and the popular three-day Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in Golden Gate Park, the four-string is struggling to keep its audience and players.

Today, there are fewer than a dozen four-string groups and even fewer venues in the Bay Area, Bottorff said.

"The style that Jim and his people play is a nostalgic style that they have endeavored to keep alive," said Johnny Baier, the executive director of the American Banjo Museum in Oklahoma City.

"In the 1920s, the plectrum banjo (four-string)



DOUG DURAN/STAFF

With shotgun shells on his fingers and a whistle in his mouth, Wineland Banjo Band member Paul Knechtli, of Livermore, plays a washboard fitted with a cowbell, wood block and bicycle horn.

was like the electric guitar is today, and Eddie Peabody was like Bruce Springsteen, and that is not an exaggeration. That is how (the plectrum banjo) was tied to the mainstream pop, and since then, it has never regained that popularity."

It came close in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the Bay Area when post-World War II veterans flocked to the region and hoped to

reclaim the carefree spirit of the music from the 1920s and 1930s, Baier said.

The 1920s was when ragtime music found its way into jazz bands, and the five-string banjo players needed a way for it to stand out. They began playing their banjos like guitars, plucking them with a plectrum pick and that fifth string got in the way.

As four-string banjos

started to come on the market, it gave mandolin players a new instrument to be heard during the dance craze.

"When you see (four-string banjo) groups out there, they are preservationists in nature and are favoring a style of music and banjo that had its heyday," Baier said of the banjo museum.

The craft of the music

is not lost on today's audience.

At a recent Wineland Banjo Band show, a fan left the group the following note on a napkin at Harry's Hofbrau in Livermore.

"Thank you so much!" the anonymous note read. "You are like the monks who preserved Western Culture through the Dark Ages."

Charlie Tagawa, a long-time member of the Penin-

MORE INFORMATION ON WINELAND BANJO BAND

For details, go to www.jbott.com/winelandbanjoband.html.

sula Banjo Band and a 2003 inductee of the National Four String Hall of Fame, has been preserving the four-string banjo for the past seven decades as both a teacher and critically acclaimed player.

Young players wanted

Tagawa still plays once a week with the Peninsula band at Harry's Hofbrau in San Jose, and when he's not playing he's teaching students, most in their golden years.

"Teaching the banjo is interesting, and almost nobody is under 40 years old," Tagawa said. "Most of my students are over 50 years old, and they decided to play after they retired."

The Wineland Banjo Band knows the challenges of an aging pool of fans. The group was founded with 16 members, and since then two have died. Bottorff points out that when he started playing the banjo in 1958, he was the youngest in his group, and now at 70 he is still one of the youngest.

"The biggest problem we have now is all the musicians expiring on us," said Paul Knechtli, one of Wineland's two washboard players. "We are in need of some warm bodies."

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