

From the Seldom Scene to the Seldom Heard Of

An Interview about Arlington Bluegrass with CABOMA Founder, Don Rusnack

By Zack Youcha

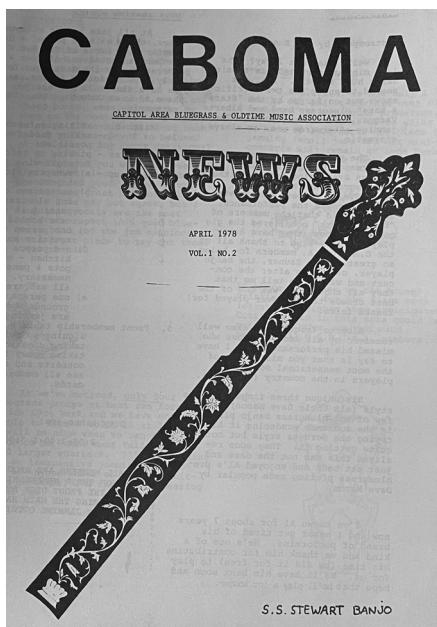
In the 1940s, Arlington, along with the rest of the DC area, saw a massive influx of Southern workers. They came looking for factory jobs made available by the new war effort. The music they brought with them complemented a fomenting folk revivalist movement in the Northeast, causing a bluegrass explosion that forged an enduring legacy for the entire DMV (the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia). Arlington saw its fair share of action during the heyday of what is now called “capital bluegrass.”¹

In the early 1950s the county received attention because of WARL (Langston Boulevard and George Mason Drive), a radio station that carried the popular Don Owens show, which hosted local and traveling bluegrass virtuosos, inspired the younger generation of DC area bluegrass players, and even caused a young John Fahey to create the genre of American Primitive guitar playing, which in turn influenced a number of well-known American alternative acts like Sonic Youth and Jim O’Rourke.² By the late 1950s that young and inspired generation grew to create bands, and these bands needed spaces to perform. It was in this environment that The Birchmere came into existence in 1966. Now a legendary concert venue for folk, bluegrass, country, and old-time music, this Alexandria institution had its humble beginnings in a strip mall at 2723 S. Wakefield Street on the border of the Claremont and Shirlington neighborhoods.³ By the establishment of The Birchmere, one famous DMV bluegrass band, the Country Gentlemen, already had a meteoric rise and an early breakup (although it would

reform several times with many noteworthy players). Two of its early members, Tom Gray and John Duffey, went on to found the most storied capital bluegrass band of all time, the Seldom Scene. Duffey, remembered as the “father of modern bluegrass,” lived his adult life in Arlington, and worked as a luthier at Arlington Music (now Pastries by Randolph in Lee Heights).⁴

There is much written about these Arlington legends, but little said about the community and culture that enabled them. They were regular people, be they fans or smaller bands and hobbyist musicians, who fostered and maintained an environment where bluegrass radio, bluegrass bands, and bluegrass concert venues could all find high levels of success. Although WARL faded into obscurity, the DMV still has a digital bluegrass radio station in WAMU, The Birchmere still hosts famous touring musicians, and the Seldom Scene still performs with its fourth iteration of players. It is to the credit of the bluegrass lovers of this region that such achievements are possible. Another Arlington institution, the Capital Area Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association, or CABOMA, was and continues to be instrumental in the upkeep of DC bluegrass culture, in preserving a community to inspire and support the local legends and in “keeping the underbelly alive,” as my interviewee jokingly says (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Cover of an early CABOMA newsletter, 1978.



Don Rusnack is capital bluegrass to the bone (Fig. 2). Since moving from Pittsburgh to Alexandria in the 1950s (and later to Arlington), he has been an active participant, witness, and historian of all things bluegrass in the DC

Talking Arlington Bluegrass

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Fig. 2: Portrait of Don Rusnack, ca. 1973.

area.⁵ I asked Don about the founding of CABOMA and how he came to establish such a long-lasting organization. He set the scene for me by recounting his early years in Virginia: falling in love with songs listening to the radio, finding bluegrass records in Tommy Summers Record Store in Alexandria, not wanting to play classical banjo like his father, and learning *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* from Pete Seeger's *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*. Although he was the only banjo player in his high school, Rusnack eventually found like-minded individuals and started his own band, Home Brew (Fig. 3). Around this time, he also taught himself to build banjos from the instructions in the first

edition of *Earl Scruggs and the Five-String Banjo*. This eventually led to him opening a small instrument shop, Vintage Music, on the second floor of the Underwood building on the corner of Wilson Boulevard and North Highland Street in Arlington.

It was Rusnack's time at Vintage Music that laid the groundwork for CABOMA (Fig. 4). He remembers wanting to foster a real community around his shop—"I wanted the music store to maybe evoke the old country store. You come into the front, you know, get a pickle off of the pickle barrel and play. I liked the idea of being in business and having all these guys show up for music. And if they didn't buy anything, well, we had a great time." While this ethos was not a sustainable business model, it succeeded in drawing in local musicians. Soon, Vintage Music became a meeting ground for local jam sessions, where now notable musicians like Dan Mazer started. "He was one of the first guys, couldn't play a lick. And Eric Knowles, Bill Fox, those cats—all now really good"—would come to learn and play at his shop. He calls this period "the catalyst." "It got to be so crowded, and there just wasn't enough room in the music store. And people kept knocking on guitars

Fig. 3: Home Brew, Don Rusnack's band, (L-R) Gary Thompson on mandolin, Ken Kanline on guitar, Paul Gibson on bass, Don Rusnack on banjo, ca. 1975.



Courtesy of Don Rusnack

Courtesy of Don Rusnack

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Fig. 4: Advertisement for Don Rusnack's music store, Vintage Music, ca. 1972.

and being very apologetic and actually buying the guitar after they trashed it." In 1978, Rusnack got the idea to make an organization that could support larger groups of musicians:

So, I looked for a place for CABOMA. And then one of my friends who had just got a job in the State Department, an attorney, he wrote up the bylaws. And that started the ball rolling. I was looking for a place to have these jams. And my wife knew someone who was on the board for Lyon Park Community Center, so we had a whole block in North Arlington.

I asked Rusnack to zoom out a little bit and look at the wider bluegrass scene in Arlington during this period. Which bluegrass bands played in Arlington and where? He listed a compendium of bands (included at the end of this article) and started to describe a bygone interdependence between restaurants and musicians.

We would go up to restaurants and just market ourselves. We said, can we play here one night, cheap, and if you get more of a crowd, then we'll talk and see if we can get any more money?

And we would go [to a bunch of restaurants] and play on the cheap until you [find a place] that really, you know, clicks. [Once you] click with and owner, then you have a steady gig.

So, we would play anywhere, and if the restaurants were making money, they didn't care what you did. They didn't care what you played. How good? How bad? If there were twenty more people that night to sit in booths and buy food, you're in. So anyway, it's anything on the cake if you're good. I like that.

When I pushed for specific restaurants in Arlington, he told me about a long-gone German restaurant, Brautwurst Haus where Ballston Mall now stands on the corner of Wilson Boulevard and Glebe Road. They frequently hosted local bands; but give credit where credit is due, the early Birchmere was the real spot for bluegrass bands in Arlington. Before making a name for himself in the world of concert venues, owner Gary Oelze gave his stage to several local bands, including early iterations of CABOMA jam groups. Neither Oelze nor the bands made much money, but they kept each other going and kept bluegrass lovers engaged in the music.

Rusnack briefly moved his scope outside of Arlington, telling me about seeing bluegrass hall-of-famers Don Reno and Red Smiley at a bar and brothel in Beacon Hill, Alexandria. He noted that there were a number of similarly seedy locations heading south on Route 1 towards Richmond: "After the topless dancers got off, then a bluegrass band would come in!" Not all the Route 1 locations were disreputable. Reno and Smiley frequented Hillbilly Heaven (owned by Earl Dixon, Dan Akroyd's father-in-law), and there was another music-only club called Rockabilly. Moving back north, Rusnack noted an old club named JVs in Falls Church, the Tiffany Tavern in Alexandria, and the locally famous Red Fox in Bethesda that regularly hosted local bluegrass bands.

We ended this part of the conversation talking about The Birchmere again and how its weekly shows with the Seldom Scene ensured the venue's longevity by bringing in large audiences and famous performers. The Seldom Scene helped create a space for bluegrass, even as mainstream culture moved away from Americana and folk revivalism. Their musicality (especially John Duffey's) was so impressive that people travelled from all over the world to see them perform at The Birchmere. (Touring was a rarity, since they all had day jobs and Duffey was afraid of flying). Now-famous musicians like Ricky Skaggs,

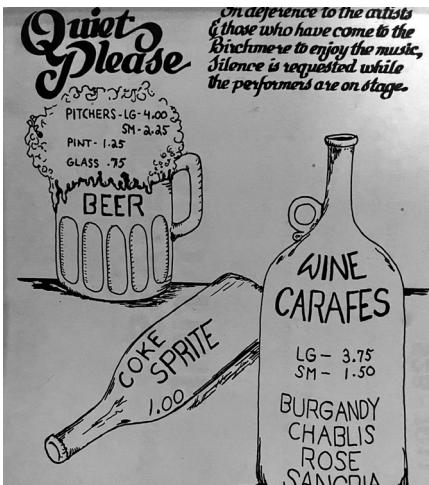
Emmylou Harris, and Linda Ronstadt came to the DC area to learn from and perform with the Seldom Scene.⁶ The Birchmere benefitted greatly because of the legend of the Seldom Scene, and now it used that legend to grow into what is today: a place that regularly brings famous musicians to Northern Virginia (Fig. 5). It's a good segue to my next question. As the general popularity of bluegrass died down in the DC area, how did people keep the flame alive?

How did CABOMA and others keep others interested and maintain the community? Rusnack spoke first to his work with CABOMA as being

kind of laissez-faire, I have to admit it. We've done more educational things. I think it's more important to get new players started right and then send them out to be, you know, onstage. You know, that's where I think we shine. We've offered a place, twice a month, for anyone, novice or expert, to go and play. You could slow jam, fast jam, and we're accommodating to all levels and all ages, everything. We've done workshops. I used to do old-time banjo workshops, I did a bluegrass workshop, too.

He attributed the continued success of CABOMA and its larger community to an amazing network of volunteers and his ex-wife, Terry.

She was always there to help do anything required to get things done. Cannot stress enough her importance to the organization. We're all indebted to her. And all the volunteers, you know, who gave their time. Kudos to them because they just took it all and they kept it going, kept it going, kept



Courtesy of Don Rusnack.

Fig. 5: Menu from *The Birchmere*, ca. 1970.

it going. And because they loved the historic value to it. [They make us] steady. We're small. We've had a lot of people [at various points], but we're not striving to get all these people to come to us. They'll find us, and then once they find us, they stay. Volunteerism is so important with anything, any kind of group. You know, you can find this kind of passion with anything—cards, bluegrass, blues, stamp collecting. But the volunteers are the ones that keep it going. All our members throughout the years have been a joy to be around. It's not the music we make, it's the folks we meet while playing it.

Rusnack went on to praise the work of different organizations in the area like WAMU and the DC Bluegrass Union, amongst others. He also meditated on the importance of *Bluegrass Unlimited*, a magazine started in the DMV by Dick Spottsworth and Pete Kuykendall in the '60s, that was key in tying together a cohesive bluegrass scene. He noted that the Arlington-born John Kaparakis, a member of the Lonesome River Boys, was an early collaborator with Spottsworth and Kuykendall.

They took Bluegrass seriously. And really to the nth degree. I mean, you really had the minutiae of bluegrass. And I was just going through this first one, and they gave people who wrote [letters] a lot of time, and they printed their comments. So, if you really were into bluegrass and really wanted to know the ins and outs, *Bluegrass Unlimited* was the thing to read.

While Spottsworth and Kuykendall would go on to make successful careers centered around music, Kaparakis joined the Arlington Fire Department. He kept playing bluegrass his whole life, and as Rusnack remembers it, was instrumental in teaching new CABOMA members not just the mechanics of playing the music, but also the deep history of bluegrass in the DC area (Fig. 6).

Thinking about the role Kaparakis played in passing on an almost century-long musical heritage, I asked my final question: How can people still engage with this living tradition in Arlington? Outside of going to bluegrass jams and concerts, Rusnack said to engage with the people who have lived in the county the longest. You never know their

experiences. “Talk to these guys and let them, you know, reminisce. It’s amazing what you’ll find out.”

Arlington has a lot of bluegrass history to offer, from the musical inheritance of WARL radio to the legend of John Duffey and the original Birchmere; all whose initial success revolved around a local community of bluegrass-loving people who wanted to play and hear good music: “the underbelly.” That underbelly still exists. People like Don Rusnack and the members of CABOMA help keep the bluegrass tradition alive in Arlington (Fig. 7). During our interview, Rusnack and I went on a tangent about CABOMA having to leave Lyon Village and relocate. When confronted with the possibility of meeting outside Arlington, Rusnack remembered fighting “the idea hard! I’ve never been so passionate about anything like that before. This is an Arlington-based organization. It needs to remain that.” Thanks to these efforts

Fig. 6: John Kaparakis and the New Old Time String Band, (Standing L-R) Pat MacCauley, Andrew Acosta, John Kaparakis; (Seated) Roy “Speedy” Tolliver, 2013.

Courtesy of Arlington Historical Society



to remain local, the legacy of American bluegrass continues to be written in Arlington.

Compendium of local bluegrass bands (Provided by Don Rusnack, Fred Nystrom, and a 1982 Blueprint Newspaper)

Ambush Pass, Appalachian Reign, Bennie and Vallie Cain, Bill Emerson and Sweet Dixie, Bill Harrell and the Virginians, Bittersweet, Bluegrass 79, Bluegrass Buddies, Bluegrass Image, Bluegrass Tradition, Bob Arney, Bob Purkey & The Blueridge Travelers, Brandy Station, Brandywine Junction, Busby Brothers, Busch County Mountaineers, Cabin Hill, Carroll County Ramblers, Country Haze, Country Zone, Coup de Grass, D&D Review, David Grier Band, Dixie Rebels, Dixie Union, DJ & CB Pickers, Dukes of Bluegrass, East Virginia, Ed Schaeffer and the Rattlesnake Hill, Emery Ledford and Gunpowder Bluegrass, Falling Branch String Band, Foggy Bottom, Franklin-Harpe-Usilton, Frontier Justice, Full Tilt String Band, Grass Menagerie, Grass on the Rocks, Grass Reflections, Grazzmatazz, Grim Pickers, Harry Morgan and Friendlies, Hobbs and Partners, Honeysuckle Rose, Jack Fincham & Dixies Grass, Jim Bowman and Patuxent Valley Boys, Kenny Rogers and the Down Home Pickers, Kentucky Kinfolk, Last Exit, Last Straw,

Fig. 7: Founding members of CABOMA, ca. 1978.



Courtesy of Don Rusnack

Leon Morris, Mountain City Union, Mountain Laurel, Mountain Light, New Freedom Grass, New Grass Union, New Old Time String Band, Old Friends, Orange Line Special, Outer Banks, Over the Hill Gang, Overland Express, Patent Pending, Patuxent Partners, Potluck, Puckett Brothers, Radford Brothers, Red Toad Road, Robin Ruddy, Rock Creek, Rose Hill Band, Sam Morgan, Skystone Bluegrass Band, Slim Pickens, Southern Edition, Southwind, Spirits of Bluegrass, Spouts of Grass, Stars and Bars, Stoney Point, Stoney Ridge, Swinging Bridge, The Balderson Brothers, The Old Stand Bys, Uptown Grass Band, Warren Blair & Southland, Willow Creek, Windy Ridge.

CABOMA meets twice a month at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia, 4444 Arlington Boulevard, 22204. Go to www.caboma.org for more information.

About the Author

Zack Youcha was born and raised in Arlington but now lives in New York City working as an editor. Being a lifetime musician and record collector, he doubles as a researcher of heritage music and an events coordinator.

If you have any recordings or memorabilia related to bluegrass in Arlington, please contact Zack at zackyoucha@gmail.com.

Endnotes

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2. John Fahey, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, Drag City Incorporated, 2000; Coley, Byron, “The Persecutions and Resurrections of Blind Joe Death,” *Perfect Sound Forever*, May 2001.
3. Stephen Moore and Gary Oelze, *All Roads Lead to the Birchmere: America’s Legendary Music Hall*, BookLocker.com Incorporated, 2021.
4. Stephen Moore, *John Duffey’s Bluegrass Life*, BookLocker.com Incorporated, 2020.
5. Don Rusnack, interview by Zack Youcha, June 25, 2024.
6. Moore.