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The land of pleasant pickin'

The Friday night rites at a music shop in Deale draw a bluegrass crowd from far and wide

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The pews are full in the house of picking and strumming. So is every folding chair.

Unlike a symphony orchestra, where seating is rigidly enforced, no one at the Good Deale Bluegrass Shop gives a hoot whether the dobro player sits next to a like-fingered musician or whether a fellow packs up his fiddle and picks up a mandolin.

Somebody takes the lead. Little by little, the players fall into line: An acoustic bass provides the booming underpinnings, guitars push the melody along, and fiddles and banjos dip in and out. A brave soul takes a stab at the vocals, a chorus breaks out or maybe the tune remains an instrumental.

The group finishes playing more or less at the same time before another tune gathers steam and takes off.

It's been this way every Friday night for seven years, ever since Tim Finch left his music shop's red-and-blue "open" sign on and the door unlocked for the bluegrass-loving musicians he fondly calls "shore billies."

This homemade jam is decidedly local in flavor but draws musicians from Northern Virginia and the D.C. area who learned about it by word-of-mouth. Almost everyone knows everyone else, but if a stranger pulls up a seat and rosins up his bow, the more the merrier.

Finch raised a lot of eyebrows in Deale, a fishing town in southern Anne Arundel County, when he opened his bluegrass store next to a pizza shop in a tiny strip mall.



Benny Harris is one of many bluegrass lovers who visit a music shop in Deale on Friday nights to jam.

(Sun photo by Monica Lopossay)
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"We didn't think it would last six months, let alone seven years," says charter boat Capt. Jim Brincefield, a 45-year resident. "I mean, after you've bought one guitar, how many more do you need?"

Yet, the shop not only survived a change in ownership last August, when Finch sold it to Mark Sullivan, it has been the catalyst for a host of other projects: a fall bluegrass festival, the Good Deale Bluegrass Band, the Eastman String Band - formerly known as "the Shop Band" - and Finch's marriage to a bluegrass singer.

Deale, a community of 5,000 people, has become the Land of Pleasant Pickin'. That explains the store. But the popularity of the after-hours jam session?

"For the average person who doesn't get to play all the time - all bluegrass musicians don't live on the same block - it's a party, a social event, a place to trade licks," says Finch, a hearty man who, when it comes to bluegrass and politics, delights in coloring outside the lines.

Talk of bluegrass usually conjures images of small towns nestled in mountains and rolling hills, the rollicking tunes of Flatt and Scruggs and the goose-bumps harmonies of Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. After riding a wave of popularity in the 1950s and '60s, the music was drowned out by rock and soul. But bluegrass has seen a recent resurgence due to Alison Krauss and Union Station, Del McCoury, and the Grascals, as well as the O Brother, Where Art Thou? movie soundtrack.

No one can explain why it has taken root in a town that fronts **Chesapeake Bay**, but they are glad it did.

On this Friday night, the players and their audience arrive in twos and threes. Almost everyone drops a dollar or two in the straw basket by the door.

"It helps pay the electric bill," explains Benny Harris, an **Annapolis** man who arrives with his guitar, a cup of 7-Eleven coffee and his wife, Judy. "I come down and play, and she comes down and talks. Sometimes it's five of us, and sometimes it's a full house."

Ask a question, get a story.

There's John Ace, a fiddle and mandolin player, who spends summers on his 36-foot sailboat anchored in the West River while he teaches sailing. In the winter, he and his wife head for warmer waters off the Bahamas.



Wearing a cowgirl hat, Nora Linkins keeps a steady beat while playing washboard at the gatherings. "I can't imagine a Friday without this," says the octogenarian.

(Sun photo by Monica Lopossay)
Sep 22, 2006

"They don't play much bluegrass down there, so I have to get my fill," he says.

In his black cowboy hat, Bill Pulanco looks as if he belongs but says he didn't start playing guitar until about 10 years ago, when he and his wife divorced.

"I got a guitar and a Harley, and I've still got both," says the 60-year-old merchant.

Another regular comes early and stays to the bitter end. Nora Linkins arrives in a wheelchair, a sparkling pink cowboy hat atop her white hair, a dollar washboard in her lap and dime-store thimbles on her fingers. All evening, from joyous dance tunes to mournful lost-love laments, she keeps a steady, scratchy beat. In a soft voice, she sings along.

"I can't imagine a Friday without this," says the octogenarian, eyes twinkling.

In a room of equals, however, Hank Gentry is the most equal.

The quiet, courtly man in the plaid shirt cradling a 1937 Gibson guitar ("It's older than most of the people here," he says) is the man everyone waits to hear. At 79, he draws on decades of playing professionally, "when it was called hillbilly music," he says.



Dennis "Holly" Hollidayoke picks away at his banjo as he jams with fellow musicians at the Good Deale Bluegrass Shop.

(Sun photo by Monica Lopossay)
Sep 22, 2006

Cancer has robbed him of his energy but not his artistry. The room grows silent as his fingers dance over the strings, first picking out snatches of traditional bluegrass songs and later launching into a spunky version of "Lady of Spain."

"I'm not as fast as I used to be," he says, almost apologetically as the room erupts in applause.

With an album cover of bluegrass legend Monroe propped on the counter and a poster of Barney Fife looking down from one wall, the group swings into "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

Bill Adams, a school administrator from Waldorf who handles the upright bass from a seated position, directs musical traffic from one soloist to another with a nod or a wink.

In the audience, a woman in a periwinkle sweater pulls a harmonica from her pocket and softly plays along.

The song ends with a smattering of applause and a few "Oh, yeahs."

The evening rolls on. Players come and go. Susan Borst and Maryann Byrnes are drawn inside as they wait for their pepperoni-and-ham pizza next door.

After 15 minutes, Byrnes nudges Borst and whispers, "Do you think it's done?"

"Do you care?" Borst replies.

Reluctantly, the two women break away.

When the bottom drops out of a song while Adams wolfs down a slice of pizza, Sullivan picks up the bass and fills in. Dinner finished, Adams gets up and takes a banjo from the wall to join in a rousing version of "I Saw the Light."

Sullivan said that when Finch handed him the keys to the store last year, he never considered changing a thing about the Friday night jam.

"What would I add?" he asks, his hand sweeping the room.

Although he's moved to the Eastern Shore and is only an occasional visitor to the shop, Finch breaks into a satisfied smile when he hears Sullivan's comment.

"If that store shut down, people would be there anyway," he says. "That's how big it is."

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