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The Blackstone Valley Bluegrass Band: *Goin' up with that high and lonesome sound*

By Brian Goslow

With its merchandise booths, free promotional material and endless hallway jam sessions, the Joe Val Bluegrass Festival each February is as lively as any other music festival. But instead of selling the latest trends, its participants keep bluegrass music alive and thriving.

This year, the Blackstone Valley Bluegrass Band made its Joe Val debut in the Framingham Sheraton's main ballroom. The "newcomers" to the Joe Val were warmly greeted as they took the stage.

The truth is, Ken Taylor, Dan Nowlan and Bob and Dave Dick are anything but newcomers. Chances are, if you've heard bluegrass music anywhere in Central Massachusetts in the past decade, you've come across one or more members of the group. Collectively, however, even though they've been a band since 1999, individual obligations have made Blackstone performances rare.

That's about to change.

Dave Dick of Southbridge, who plays a 1926 vintage Gibson banjo, recently left New England's best known bluegrass band Northern Lights, whom he had played with since 1999.

His brother, Bob Dick of Northbridge, had toured the United States and Europe playing stand-up bass with Front Range since 1991. That group disbanded last year, however, after the death of mandolin player Mike Lantz. In Blackstone, Bob mostly plays a Martin B18 Golden Era model guitar and fiddle.

They've done some other gigs together, but this is the first time the brothers have played with one another on a regular basis since performing with Bear Acker and Billings Gap more than two decades ago. They're joined in Blackstone by Ken Taylor, Bob Dick's neighbor in Northbridge who regularly performs with Maine fiddler Erica Brown, and by mandolin player Dan Nowlan of Thompson, Conn.

Nowlan also plays with Chuck & Mud and Shady Creek and all four members of Blackstone play occasional gigs with the Worcester County Bluegrass All Stars. Bob Dick performs with Valerie and Walter Crockett and the Oxymorons and also with SloGrass and Herd of Cats. Dave Dick plays on CMH Record's "Pickin' On" series, in which he co-produced, and performed on "Pickin' on Jack Johnson," "Pickin' on Dwight Yokum," and "A Bluegrass Tribute to the Eagles." And Taylor also plays with the

Heritage String Band, Chuck & Mud and ... well, you get the idea. These guys can pick and sing and they get plenty of gigs.

Right now, though, all four are focusing their attention on the Blackstone Valley Bluegrass Band.

"We're not hopping into a van to do this full time but we are in it for the long haul," said Dave Dick, who is a luthier at Union Music in Worcester. "We're all married with families and tied to day jobs."

Their Joe Val appearance opened with powerful three-part-harmony on "Girl at the Crossroads Bar." Nowlan, a timepiece dangling from his belt, played mandolin as fast as Eddie Van

Halen plays guitar. Even with a full stage to work with, the group bunched together to harmonize around a single microphone and the act had the effect of pulling the listener up on stage.

"We want people to not feel a barrier between us and them," Taylor said. "We want them with us."

On "I Cried Again," Bob Dick's voice had such a great gospel feel that it's surprising to learn he didn't grow up singing in church choirs.

"Both of us grew up as players," said brother Dave. "I didn't start singing until someone left one of the groups I was in and I was forced to

sing backing harmonies. The same thing goes for my brother."

Bob Dick's early inspiration came from The Seldom Scene, The Country Gentlemen and Tony Rice. Along with the benefits of taking vocal lessons, he said, "I've been blessed to sing with a lot of great singers when I was with Front Range."

Blackstone has a welcoming manner on stage.

"What you see on stage is the way we are," Dave Dick said. "We don't enter a different mode. We've got a lot of energy between us. We're punsters and like to pick on each other."

Taylor follows the tradition of tall stand-up bassists with a warm sense of humor and a deep baritone voice. On the fast numbers, his slap style of playing has the feel of a train ride, especially when Blackstone tears it up on New Hampshire songwriter Rick Lang's "Shadow in the Pines."

When he's at his day job of steel company sales manager and someone asks him about his music gigs, Taylor tells them he plays "White Soul." A song can't get more spiritual or soulful than the gospel-flavored "Goin' Up," where Blackstone sings about saving themselves from sin.



Bob Dick, Ken Taylor, Dan Nowlan and Dave Dick

A Dave Dick composition, "Nine Men's Misery," has its origins in a historic marker in Cumberland, R.I., marking where nine colonists were killed by Indians during King Philip's War.

"I intend to carry the history of the Blackstone Valley with us to our shows," Dave Dick said.

"Nine Men's Misery" started slowly like a Civil War hymn and then Dave's calculated guitar turned it into as intense a performance as you'll experience.

Attending bluegrass festivals in the 1980s convinced Nowlan to move in that direction. He began playing with a group of bluegrass guitarists. The camaraderie was great but the results were messy.

"We had a little jam, a cluster pluck, if you will," Nowlan said.

One of those other guitar players was Taylor, who had moved to the Blackstone Valley from Pennsylvania. One day, the duo made a bet with each other.

"I told Ken, 'If you get a bass, I'll get a mandolin,'" Nowlan said.

They've been playing together ever since.

The mandolin chop drives a



bluegrass band much like a snare drum drives a rock band and now, after 17 years of playing together, Nowlan and Taylor have become a super tight unit.

The Joe Val festival appearance has brought Blackstone a series of bookings, including one June 16 show at Amazing Things Arts Center in Framingham. Blackstones' next show is May 19 at the Vanilla Bean Café in Pomfret, Conn.

The band is also in Bob's Appleland Studio recording a debut CD, tentatively titled *Born to Be with You*.

Taylor promised the recording will capture the group at their best, "when the songs are up-tempo and flying and you can hear the joy we have when we're

playing together."

By year's end, BVBB hopes to have expanded their fan base through playing as far south as Virginia and as far north as Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, and through their web site, blackstonevalleybluegrass.com.

They know their music will never make them rich, but the real payment will come from finally getting to play together on a regular basis.

"You know how you make a million dollars playing bluegrass?" Nowlan said. "Start with \$2 million." ●

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