



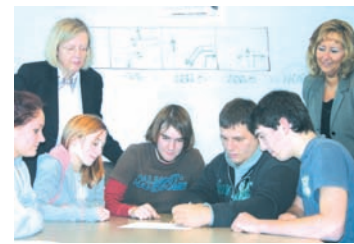
SPORTS

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Thomas Mattson photo

Members of the Blackstone Valley Bluegrass Band include, from left, Dan Nowlan, Dave Dick, Ken Taylor and Bob Dick.

SOME KIND OF PICKIN' BLACKSTONE VALLEY BLUEGRASS BAND DELIGHTS

BY THOMAS MATTSO
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

NORTHBRIDGE — Bluegrass is alive and well in these parts.

Thanks to the Blackstone Valley Bluegrass Band.

Bob Dick, Ken Taylor, Dan Nowlan and Dave Dick packed them in last Friday night — at least 75 or more turned out — at the Grass Roots Coffeehouse in the basement of the Rockdale Congregational Church on Fowler Road.

And what pickin'.

Bob Dick, of Northbridge, played the guitar, his brother Dave, formerly of this area but now living in Southbridge, did the banjo, Ken Taylor, also of Northbridge, played the bass, and Dan Nowlan, who grew up in Rockdale and now lives in Thompson, Conn., played the mandolin.

Nowlan gives the group a kinetic feel as he sways, leans and virtually dances on stage. Taylor is majestic and at 6-4 is only a little shorter than the bass he plays. His voice is appropriately within the same octave as his bass. Bob Dick sings a lot and they all in fact do solos and come together in harmonies. Dave Dick is the scholar of the bunch, posing word puzzles and getting into history.

All, as a woman from Douglas noted, interact well and their constant humor is lively and good-natured. Taylor and Bob Dick are elders of the Rockdale

Congregational Church. "They're all good," said Dennis Kimball, of Hopkinton, of the bluegrass players. "It's good rhythm. These guys really

thing is, his musical associates pitched right in, having no trouble accompanying Dick, no matter how fast the pace.

The one discernible tune in

sparse instrumentation (often with banjo players switching to lead guitar)."

In addition to instrumentation, bluegrass is marked by

his wife Paula stumbled on the place off Route 114 not far from Route 295, and the story and place inspired him to compose the piece for instruments that the band played flawlessly last week.

Dave Dick also composed something called "Blackstone Valley Breakdown," a whiz-bang, lightning-fast piece featuring pickin' as fast as you can imagine.

"We're very pleased with the crowd," said Don Lange, an active member of the church. "We just paid \$60,000 to reopen the basement."

"Since the term bluegrass came from Bill Monroe's band, The Blue Grass Boys, many consider the instruments used in his band the traditional bluegrass instruments," *Wikipedia* says. "These were the mandolin (played by Monroe), the fiddle, guitar, banjo and upright bass."

"At times," the online encyclopedia continues, "the musicians may perform gospel songs, singing four-part harmony and including no or sparse instrumentation (often with banjo players switching to lead guitar)."



Bob Dick, second from the left, Dan Nowlan and Dave Dick harmonize for some 75 appreciative fans Friday night at the Rockdale Congregational Church in Northbridge.

know how to pick the banjos. They get it to sing for them."

The group had a surprising range, moving from sentimental favorites like Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" to some brilliantly improvised instrumentation Dave Dick crafted to create an atmosphere round the story he told of "Nine Men's Misery."

Asked later whether he wrote the piece down, Dick said, "Oh, no. I play it from memory."

And it was no brief riff. The

subtle instrumentation was the nursery rhyme, "And they all came tumblin' down."

Dave Dick came up with the piece after visiting an historic site in Cumberland, R.I. — it was Central Falls in the 17th century — where nine Colonial soldiers were killed in King Philip's War around 1667. One man of the 10 who fought the Indians survived to tell the story. There is a small monument in the woods near a former monastery now used as a public library, Dick said. He and

vocal harmonies with two, three, or four parts. According to *Wikipedia*, "they often feature a dissonant... sound in the highest voice, an emphasis on traditional songs, often with sentimental or religious themes."

The style employs something known as the "high lonesome" sound with a "nasal timber sung over the main melody."

Bluegrass developed during the mid 1940s. It is "an amalgam of old-time music, blues, ragtime

and jazz."

Even so, the beginnings of bluegrass can be traced to one band. Bill Monroe is known as the "founding father" of bluegrass music. The bluegrass style was named for his band, the Blue Grass Boys, formed in 1939. Other waves followed.

Bluegrass also has roots in African-American and Scottish music.

Because of the intricate musicianship of bluegrass, even the most sentimental favorites in love songs and of faith despite loss take on an authority they might not otherwise have for people who may not share the premises of given lyrics. So in spite of oneself, even the most discriminating among an audience can find himself or herself moved emotionally and brought along into the sweep of things.

The group opened with "Girl at the Crossroads Bar," moved on to "I Cried Again," and then to "Swinging Bridge" and "Cold December."

Then it was "Weary Lonesome Blues," "Home/Devil's Dream" and the inimitable "Nine Men's Misery."

"My Lord Will Comfort Me" came next, then "Something Bout You," "Detour Sign," a kind of fun piece, and "High Lonesome Sound."

After an intermission, the bluegrass ensemble sang a prisoner's lament of working in the gravel yard: "Makin' little rocks out of big rocks all day/ I'll never be a free man, so they say."

Then Taylor sang "I'll Fly Away."

"When I die I'll fly to the land of God's celestial shores/ I'll fly away."

"I'll fly away, O Lord,

In the morning when I die.

Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away."

Then Dan Nowlan sang about an engineer who disappeared in Cumberland, perhaps in the Cumberland Gap of Tennessee, but nobody was sure exactly where, when a bridge collapsed.

It was called "Shadow in the Pines" and told of a spirit that haunted the railroad line, never making a sound, but casting a shadow.

The group harmonized a lot of drawn-out train wails as they plucked backup on their instruments.

Then, in "Lately," a number by Rick Lane, they sang "You've left a memory time can't erase."

"Goin' Up," a gospel song, and "The Miner's Prayer," composed by Dwight Yoakam, were among the religious numbers rendered.

Bob Dick sang a tune he called his favorite, "Goodby, Mary," and the sense of love and loss and death continued with "Blue Ridge Cabin Home."

For one of their two encores, the group spread out around the audience to lead all in "O, Will the Circle Be Unbroken?"

All four members of the Blackstone Valley Bluegrass work at regular jobs, have produced CDs, and give lessons on a variety of instruments.