

Pam "Belle Monroe" Brandon:

Interview with San Francisco bluegrass artist from "back east"

By Chuck Poling

Belle Monroe and Her Brewglass Boys have been a mainstay of the San Francisco bluegrass scene for about ten years now. Fronted by Pam Brandon on guitar and vocals, the band has maintained a steady lineup over the last five years with Tom Drohan on bass, Ted Silverman on mandolin and vocals, Jordan Klein on banjo and vocals, Rick Hendricks on dobro and vocals, and Diana Greenberg (the prettiest Brewglass Boy) on fiddle. Belle and the Boys made all their San Francisco pals proud this past summer when they placed third at the prestigious Rockygrass Festival Band Competition.

They are well known for their versatility, equally adept at working a crowd into a frenzy with a put-the-pedal-to-the-metal-tempo breakdown, getting it to sing along with a bluegrass version of a Beatles tune, or stunning them with a slow, soulful ballad from the Duchess of Bluegrass herself, Belle Monroe. Of the many talented female vocalists in the Bay Area, she is notable for the command she has over her voice, easily moving from the kitten's purr to a full-throated field holler, and the range of emotion with which she colors her subjects. Belle is also known for her commanding stage presence – everyone knows when Belle is on stage and who's in charge.

So who is Belle Monroe and just what is her story?

Folks, meet Pam Brandon. She's from back east. Way east. All the way from merry old England, that green and pleasant land. By now it shouldn't be too surprising that bluegrass has worldwide appeal and has devoted followers in the United Kingdom, as well as dozens of other countries. But it's always fascinating to hear stories of how folks from other nations came to love bluegrass.

I recently had a little chat with Pam about, among other things, how she got into bluegrass, how she emigrated to the States, and how explosives are used in cave rescue. As we say in the newspaper business, she makes good copy.

Where are you from?

I am from a walled Roman city called Chester, in the North West of England near Liverpool.

When did you move to the U.S? Why?

I was an exchange student at Penn State University in my junior year of college (84/85) and moved here permanently in 1986. The student year was for adventure, but the permanent move was for love. I married an American. He was a musician, a bass player who had me loading equipment into the van on our wedding night. Hmm. Divorce wasn't too far off. I ditched the husband but kept the country. When my divorce was made final I

sold my wedding dress and bought a motorcycle with the money. I think there's a song in there somewhere. (I'm working on it, Pam.)

I know your parents played folk and bluegrass music, so it has always been a part of your life. Did you ever go through a period of thinking it couldn't be cool if your parents did it? Did you re-discover the music at a later age or were you always into it?

My parents were the coolest people I knew growing up, and I hung out with them a lot more than any of my friends did with their parents. We'd go to the jazz club every Thursday night, the folk club every Friday night, a bluegrass pick on Mondays, Irish sessions at the pub, etc. Our house contained so many instruments it would have been impossible not to grow up a musician, and musicians were always coming to stay from out of town. We were a seven banjo household. My father was a potholer (spelunker) and on the Cave Rescue, and the police would come once a year to check on my father's explosives license but never the banjos. I started playing bluegrass bass with my parents in a family band when I was 16, right when my friends were actively avoiding theirs. They thought I was mad.

How much of a bluegrass scene is there in the UK?

There's a small bluegrass scene in the UK, and a few decent festivals, like Edale and Didmartin. Festivals in England tend to be damp, muddy affairs, with lots of pub picking. Very different to the festival experience here. The rain makes for miserable BBQing. I think it's hard for touring bluegrass bands to play in the UK. It's relatively remote, hard to get a work permit, and everybody smokes in pubs.

What do you love about bluegrass and why do you think it has such an enduring popularity?

I love the sheer joy and adrenaline that comes from the musicians, the harmonies, the wonderfully breathtaking improvisational virtuosity that bluegrass demands at any speed. It's an incredibly supportive music scene where the audience is as much into playing it as listening to it. The songs are fundamentally simple yet as complex as any given player wants to make them, but the structure of the music allows for jamming, which I've come to believe is a form of drug. I met an A&R man in Nashville at BMI who said that bluegrass musicians

are the only musicians who will get off stage after a grueling set and go "Dude, let's go pick!" It's the only music genre I can think of that spans generations and continues to grow because older generations are nurturing young children to play and thrive in amongst their elders. It's kind of a social phenomenon really. Somebody must be doing a PhD thesis on it somewhere.

What do you like about the Bay Area bluegrass scene?

The Bay Area scene is a very supportive bunch of people, people who play together, refer each others bands for gigs, and throw great picking parties...er, I mean festivals! There's some great fun venues for playing, such as Amnesia (go Shawn!) and Café DuNord (get 'em Guy!) here in SF, McGrath's



Pam Brandon circa 1968

in Alameda (Peter's the man!), the Sweetwater (thanks Larry!) and Iron Springs Pub in Fairfax (yay Mike and Annel). Seriously though, without great supportive venues, where would the bands and the scene be?

Who are some of your favorite bluegrass artists of the past or present?

I had "Ragged But Right" by the Greenbriar Boys when growing up. I wore that LP out. I think there are some really great young bands out right now that I have on heavy rotation on the old mp3 player, such as the Infamous Stringdusters, King Wilkie and the Steep Canyon Rangers. Also, I love the Del McCoury Band and, for something a bit different, the Kruger Brothers. The Dick Smith and Mike O'Reilly Band from the East Coast write awesome songs.

What was your first instrument and when did you begin playing?

My first instrument was my voice, which was very loud even as a baby. I could also scream very

long notes while going red in the face, something my mother didn't appreciate, but which prepared me well for singing Little Maggie. Otherwise, my first love was the piano, which I began playing at age 5, followed by the flute, then the banjo!

Who do you consider major influences?

Most of my major influences have been vocalists, including my mom, Jean Brandon, who is a fantastic bluegrass vocalist. Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald, Anita O'Day and Sandy Denny have found their way into my vocal style over the years, rather than bluegrass vocalists really. Richard Thompson and Martin Simpson, both Brits, fed my early guitar work. Now I'm learning to play the fiddle. When it comes to the fiddle you can't beat Stuart Duncan and Stuff Smith. Boy would I like to see those two going head to head. That would be interesting.

You've been to a lot of festivals and have jammed with a lot of notable pickers. What are some of your favorite bluegrass moments?

Oh, man, there have been many...my first gig on bass with the Peter Rowan Trio was a high point. We kicked off the first notes of Free Mexican Airforce and I thought, holey moley, is this really happening?! However, most of my notable random picker moments have occurred at Rockygrass or IBMA simply because both places are overrun with notable pickers. I have sung swing with the Kruger Bothers in camp at cocktail hour and hung on for dear life playing bass with the Stringdusters, Tim Stafford, Jim Van Cleve and Frankie Nagle in Barefoot Kenny's camp. I once sat in Casey Driessen's kitchen and played for hours with Casey, Noam Pikelnny and David Grier, which was one of those "pinch me" moments. At one of my very first Rockygrass Academics I sang a duet with Chris Thile around the camp table in the wee hours, only to be stopped short by his then fiancée, who was in high school and had to get to bed. On the last night of IBMA a couple of years ago I sat on the arm of a couch in the Grey Fox hospitality suite singing in a jam at 5 AM, looking down on this small perm-headed woman singing on the couch next to me. I sat there for about an hour before she finally moved and I realized I'd been singing with Hazel Dickens. I've had some good moments at Strawberry too. I was singing at

Cactus Bob's camp late on night on the Campelot "stage" when a familiar voice joined me in harmony on the choruses. I looked over my shoulder, startled to find Tim O'Brien right next to me, lurking in the dark. In between choruses he drank whiskey with Brewglass Boy Jordan Klein and ate all our leftovers.

What brand/model was your first guitar? What are you playing now?

I grew up playing my mom's Martin D35 and borrowed her "beach guitar" when I went off to college. The first guitar I owned was a 1989 Santa Cruz Koa D that I bought in 1990 from a guy who'd had it custom made then had it out, brand spanking new, on a guitar stand when the Loma Prieta earthquake hit. A small hole was punctured in the top, but he never could live with the repair, so I bought it relatively cheaply. I still play it at home, but my Martin D41 is my main axe for gigging.

How long have the Brewglass Boys been together?

The band began in 1995 as a backing band for my parents when they came over, and we carried on after they left. Various people have cycled through in the early years, including founding member Chazz Casey on dobro and Craig Fletcher on banjo (Alhambra Valley Band, Whiskey Brothers), but this particular lineup has been together about 5 years.

Are you all going back to Rockygrass this year?

Everyone except Tom and Rick will go this year, because we all go to the Academy to soak up the wisdom of the best players in the business. The band won't be there this year to play though. I would've liked another crack at that band contest, but we're focusing on a trip to IBMA instead.

What else is ahead for you and the Boys?

The Rockygrass competition last year resulted in some hard work that re-energized us and provided some momentum that continues to this day. We are writing and working on new tunes and plan to record in March. It will be a live concert recording that we will do at the Icehouse Recording Studio in San Rafael. The studio was built by the guy that built the Abbey Road studio the Beatles recorded in, and to the same specs. We're really looking forward to that. An invited audience of about 20 people will participate, and we really want to capture the essence of our band in our element as a live act. We aim to go to IMBA in October and hopefully will secure some showcase slots there with the new CD and take Nashville by storm, and fly the San Francisco bluegrass

Pam "Belle Monroe" Brandon

flag high! After that we'll probably secure a record deal, go on the road in a too-small van, have intra-band affairs, drink too much bourbon and break up.

You haven't had any turnover in the band in a long time. What's your secret of success?

Nobody else will play with us. No, that's not true. Really, I think it's that we all play with other bands too, so we never get sick of each other. It's like an open marriage that works. We don't play too often, and really enjoy it when we do. I think that's it. It certainly isn't the money.



Pam Brandon

I know you play guitar, bass, fiddle and piano. Do you have any hidden talents you haven't displayed yet?

Aside from the aforementioned piano and flute playing, I make very good cocktails.

You have an interesting day job. Tell me about it.

Oh Chuck, you're not going to blow my cover, are you? I am a geek. A structural engineer by training, but these days spend most of my time project managing large construction projects. The new California Academy of Sciences building in Golden Gate Park is my baby. I hope all the BB readers go visit it when it opens in

2008! Rumor has it I can be seen in action on an episode of Extreme Engineering, but I'm not telling.

Do your work and our music worlds ever intersect?

Every once in a great while, yes. This happened big time in 1994 when I played in the opening night concert at the Escondido Center for the Arts, an 1800-seat concert hall I had designed as lead structural engineer. You can bet there were a lot of jokes about the stage-house not collapsing during my performance. To illustrate this, somebody dropped a stuffed teddy bear from the fly gallery, 30 feet up, which landed on the stage next to me in between songs. In the words of my Sovereign, I was not amused.

What other kind of music do you play and what do you like about it?

I play a fair amount of jazz and swing, mainly as a vocalist. I sing with Lost Weekend western swing band, which is an honor as those guys are such great players. I sang for about 10 years in a successful swing band, the Chazz Cats, as well as other miscellaneous jazz/swing projects such as the New Bing Thing, the D'Lilah Monroe Trio, Mal Sharpe's Big Money in Jazz and the Groove Welds (a blues band with Brewglass boy Tom Drohan). I love the jazz and swing stuff for the room it gives me vocally in texture and dynamics and the melodic opportunities that a more complex chord structure affords. I love the rhythmic feel of it too. Swing that's right in the pocket is like nothing else. There's the opportunity to be very feminine and sexy with this style of music, something that bluegrass doesn't really afford. Singing harmonies in bluegrass is a great feeling, but sometimes singing bluegrass can feel like yelling at someone for a couple of hours as it's kinda raw, as opposed to making love to them with your voice. And, who doesn't want a little vocal lovin'?

www.brewglassboys.com
www.pambrandon.info



Pam Brandon, Tom Drohan, Ted Silverman, Rick Hendricks, Jordan Klein, Diana Greenberg are Belle Monroe and the Brewglass Boys

Bill Evans String Summit: the best of California generations In April Concert showcases

By Kathy McFarland

Have you heard the Bill Evans String Summit yet? If not, this month will provide a great opportunity to hear some of the best musicians California has to offer with concerts scheduled for April 19th through 22nd in Visalia and in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Here are the show details:

Thursday, April 19: Mill Valley, CA: With Keystone Crossing, The Sweetwater, 153 Throckmorton Ave., 8:30 p.m. For further info, visit www.carlton.com.

Friday, April 20: Visalia, CA: College of the Sequoias, COS Theater, 7:30 p.m. For further info, phone 510-559-8879.

Saturday, April 21: San Francisco, CA: Noe Valley Music Series, Noe Valley Ministry, 1021 Sanchez St., 8:15 p.m., Tickets are \$16 in advance / \$18 at the door. For additional info, phone 415-454-5238. For further info visit www.noevalleymusicseries.com.

April 22: Felton, CA: Bill Evans String Summit (Scott Nygaard, Tashina Clarridge, Michael Witcher, Cindy Browne, Tristan Clarridge), Don Quixote's International Music Hall, located 10 minutes from Santa Cruz, 6275 Highway 9 in downtown Felton. Tickets and reservations, phone 831-603-2294 or visit www.donquixotesmusic.com. Show begins at 8 p.m.

"This is a dream band for me," says banjo player Bill Evans. "I've been interested in quite some time in putting together a band featuring some of the best of this incredible new generation of acoustic players that are based here in California." Bill is referring to Nashville-based dobro player Mike Witcher and the amazing Berkeley-based fiddlers Tashina and Tristan Clarridge. Rounding out the band is San Francisco guitarist Scott Nygaard, known for his work with Darol Anger's Republic of Strings and the Webster Sisters and Dublin bass player Cindy Browne, a long time collaborator with Bill in the bands Due West and, currently, Rustler's Moon with Kathy Kallick.

The all-instrumental format is unusual for a bluegrass band, but Bill felt he was ready to take this step forward in his career. "I looked at the tunes that I've written over the last thirty years and there's a variety of moods and influences in this body of music, but I'd like to think that it all relates easily to the larger bluegrass tradition," says Bill. "The idea of playing an all-instrumental show allows this band to perform some moodier pieces, like 'Midnight in Rosine' or 'Scotland Yard,' that wouldn't be possible to

play with a group that plays just one or two instrumentals per set. I realized we could structure a show just like I could with a singing band - mixing the moods and hopefully taking the audience to different places with this music. This isn't a jam band - it sounds like bluegrass and you'll come away feeling just as entertained and moved, at least I hope, as hearing a band with great singing. The feeling with this band comes out in the playing!" says Bill.

It's hard to imagine a more compatible group of musicians. Tristan Clarridge, on fiddle and cello, is the current Grand National Champion Fiddler as well as having won many other regional and national championships. His older sister Tashina has also won numerous national and regional contests. "These guys are really the most remarkable things about this band. When they performed together at last year's CBA Music Camp concert, they got an immediate and spontaneous standing ovation from an audience of 500. Their communication is telepathic - it's more than double fiddling - although you'll hear a lot of this too!" says Bill.

In the Bill Evans String Summit, Tashina and Tristan's fiddles weave in and out of the band's musical textures, soaring in solos and jaw dropping harmony duets and sometimes laying down thick textures of sound for the rest of the band to solo over.

Guitarist Scott Nygaard is one the top flat-picking guitar players in the world. After playing with Laurie Lewis in the 1990's, Scott worked as editor at Acoustic Guitar magazine for many years. Coming back to performing full-time in 2006, Scott is currently touring as guitarist with the Anonymous 4, a world famous female a capella group known for its performances of medieval and Renaissance music. He also performs with the Webster Sisters and, along with Tristan, in Darol Anger's Republic of Strings.

"Scott is the most lyrical guitar player I've ever worked with," says Bill. "His solos are always very imaginative and we're even starting to play a few of his tunes, which is a real treat for me. It's also great to work with someone who has so many musical influences - his ears are way big! He can interpret a tune using an incredibly expanded vocabulary of sound," says Bill.

Bass player Cindy Browne is known for her work with Wake The Dead, the innovative group that combines Irish music with the music of the Grateful Dead. She's also worked with some of the great names in jazz and in popular entertainment - folks like Bob Hope, Lionel Hampton and even Phyllis Diller. She currently directs the jazz

and American music programs at Las Positas College in Livermore.

"Cindy has been a tremendously positive force in every ensemble that I've ever worked with her in. Her musical knowledge elevates the role of the bass in the band. She still drives the group but her lines are so melodic and flowing - and she solos!" says Bill. "She's the heartbeat of the ensemble."

Banjo player Bill Evans is a Virginia native, known for his work in the 1980's with the progressive band Cloud Valley (with multiple IBMA award winning bassist Missy Raines) and in the 1990's with the ultra-traditionalists Dry Branch Fire Squad. Bill has now lived in California for a total of fourteen years. His first stint in the state came in the 1980's and early 1990's as a graduate student in ethnomusicology at UC Berkeley. In 1997, Bill returned to California with his family. At that time, he thought he would finally earn his doctorate and enter the university teaching job market but soon the PhD quest was laid aside and he had turned his full-time attention to a musical career.

These days, Bill has created a successful career from private teaching as well as leading workshops all across the country and performing not only with the String Summit but also with Jody Stecher in a duo concert they call "The Secret Life of Banjos" and in the new bluegrass band Rustler's Moon, featuring Kathy Kallick, Tom Bekeny and Cindy Browne.

Bill's 1995 Rounder CD "Native and Fine," featuring Stuart Duncan, Mike Compton and David Grier, earned an Honorable Mention for instrumental album of the year from the Association for Independent Music. Bill's 2001 CD "Bill Evans Plays Banjo," featuring John Reischman and Rob Ickes, landed on many "Best of" lists for that year, including The Chicago Tribune's.

Bill has released three instructional DVDs for AcuTab Publications, and they are the company's best sellers. This winter, Bill has been writing "Banjo for Dummies" for Wiley Publishing, the ubiquitous yellow and black book folks. Bill has taught at six CBA Music Camps and directs his own annual camp with banjo legend Sonny Osborne.

Bill has performed annually for the last several years at Hardly Strictly Bluegrass in San Francisco and continues to perform widely through California as well as nationally at coffeehouses, clubs and concert series. For more information on Bill and the Bill Evans String Summit, visit www.nativeandfine.com.