

PANHANDLE STRING BAND:
DISCOURSES ON AUTHENTICITY AND INNOVATION

The right elements are good players that get along with each other really good and are willing to expand their own musical creativity as individuals with the hope that collectively that will come together and form a unique sound. And if it's got an identity of its own and people like it then they will be a success.

Tony Rice

After I got to where I was thinking for myself and doing my own kind of music and all, I started to not to like to copy other people. That's when I started my songwriting career, and my own musical instincts. You surround yourself with good people, and you turn out to be a good person. You surround yourself with good musicians, and the same thing goes for writing. So I took all that in, and that's how I ended up where I'm in it today.

Larry Rice

Introduction

Tony and Larry Rice discuss how concepts of authenticity and innovation interact to create a distinct musical vision. These national figures in bluegrass talk about discourses specific to their own creative experiences. Many new bluegrassers participate in similar discourses on creative self-determination vs, collective identity, including Tallahassee's new grass band, Panhandle String Band. This paper narrates discourses on authenticity and innovation as they have taken and continue to take place within the Tallahassee bluegrass community.

Because folk or roots-based musics are so often associated with ideals of heritage and sincerity in music-making, the idea of authenticity remains a powerful theme within folk and popular music discourse (Porcello 2005). John Blacking describes an ideological dialectic between “purists” and “syncretists” within the authenticity debate:

The “purists” assume that radical changes in the sounds of orally transmitted music reflect some sort of moral decay, and that restoration of the “authentic” music of the people will help to reanimate the life of the community... The syncretists ... assume that the vigorous production of

new sounds indicates that the community is adapting successfully to changing circumstances (Blacking 1977, 7).

These categories are frames of reference within which to illustrate the debate. Actually, purists and syncretists share “a central concern for a certain type of music, and for certain moral values that are associated with the music and its uses and functions” (footnote needed). Terms like “purist” and “syncretist”, “authenticity” and “innovation” are not essentializing labels, but focal points in fluid spectrums.

Blacking’s construction of the purist/syncretist debate aptly describes the discourse on bluegrass music within Tallahassee’s traditional music scene. The majority of musicians and audiences in Tallahassee’s bluegrass community fit Blacking’s definition of purists. These traditional bluegrassers closely adhere to an ideal of authenticity. As such, they perform music styles and repertory established by Bill Monroe. Tallahassee’s Panhandle String Band fits Blacking’s conception of syncretists. The band’s focus on innovation is inspired by Bill Monroe’s initial creative impulse in establishing the bluegrass genre. Thus, the band performs new arrangements of the standard repertory or composes new songs. As in Blacking’s purist/syncretist model, Tallahassee’s bluegrass/newgrass discourse can be looked at as a fluid spectrum of interacting ideas. For instance, Tallahassee bluegrassers admire the musicianship of the Panhandle String Band (PSB) and the members of the Panhandle String Band respect, and are influenced by, the bluegrass tradition from which their ideas have emerged. Indeed, as will be shown, Tallahassee’s bluegrass and new grass musicians share important moral/musical values.

Using interviews of band members and their colleagues, and ethnographies written by the researcher, the paper will describe the PSB in relation to the following

categories: history of bluegrass, band member biographies, band history, band dynamics, and the band's relationship to the Tallahassee bluegrass community. In so doing, this paper will show how the Panhandle String Band negotiates issues of authenticity and innovation to create a successful niche within the Tallahassee traditional music scene.

Historical Background

There is an historical basis for the discourse on authenticity and innovation within Tallahassee's bluegrass community. Bluegrass music was pioneered by Bill Monroe in the 1940s. A nostalgic, country-based commercial art form, bluegrass is an acoustic tradition with roots in rural "Old-Time" fiddling traditions. Because of its roots-based aesthetic, bluegrass has been associated with country, "Old Time" fiddling values. Today, many bluegrass musicians and audiences, those in the Tallahassee bluegrass included, play in the manner of Bill Monroe and other early bluegrassers in order to connect with this "Old Time" sense of authenticity. Thus, many in Tallahassee's bluegrass community associate themselves with an authentic/purist viewpoint.

Innovators/syncretists have a different definition of authenticity in bluegrass. Panhandle String Band's Mickey Abraham indicates this other view:

Mickey: bluegrass music from its very conception was a tradition of innovation, and that some of the people who don't want to break with tradition are actually not keeping properly within the tradition.

PSB's location of innovation within bluegrass authenticity stems from the influence of a group of bluegrass musicians who became prominent during the folk revivals of the 1960s and 1970s. Innovators such as David Grisman and the New Grass Revival re-invigorated the sound of bluegrass by including elements of improvisation, new harmonies, and influences from other traditions such as jazz, the blues, classical, and

klezmer. In homage to the musicians of the New Grass Revival, this progressive form of bluegrass took the name new grass. Mike Snelling, bassist for PSB, explains some transitions that have taken place within bluegrass and newgrass since its beginnings.

Mike: I think the definition of new grass has changed. I think what was considered new grass in the 60s is now mainstream bluegrass. Because the first band to do it was the New Grass Revival. They were basically laughed out of every bluegrass festival around in the 60s and early 70s, and now that particular sound is exactly what you're going to hear in IBMA [International Bluegrass Music Association] now, in the 21st century.

Panhandle String Band derives its inspiration from these headliners, and as such, takes a syncretic/innovative approach to bluegrass music.

The Band

Separate character sketches will be drawn of each band member. Common and complimentary threads between the musicians' lives, influences, and ideas will then be highlighted and discussed. Thus, the history of the band's musical values and practices will be identified.

Mickey

Mickey Abraham, 28, is a mandolin player, guitarist, and promoter for the band. Medium-height with black curly hair, Mickey effectively channels his winning smile and strong hand-shake to generate good feeling both within the band and among audience members. He walks with a brisk stride, shakes hands strongly, and makes sure to look people directly in the eye. Mickey does not waste time. Multitasking is clearly one of his strong points. During our two interviews at the Black Dog coffee house, he displayed the unique ability of being able to greet several of his closest friends, talk on the phone, smoke a cigarette, and outline the history of new grass all at the same time. His energy,

drive, musicianship, and innate people skills have enabled Panhandle String Band to acquire a number of well-placed mentors both in the Tallahassee music scene and on the larger festival circuit.

Mickey grew up in Fort Lauderdale and was introduced to the world of bluegrass music through his step mother and her family. His initial training, though, was in rock music and it was not until he moved to Tallahassee to pursue a degree in creative writing at Florida State University that his interest in bluegrass music was heightened. During this time, Mickey made the acquaintance of Gordon Scott, bluegrass musician, teacher, and proprietor of Gordon's String Music. This relationship proved to be important in the development and promotion of the band. Starting out as a student, Mickey eventually worked and taught at the store.

Mickey took lessons, jammed, or made connections with other Tallahassee musicians such as Tom Henderson of the Tallahassee Bluegrass Jam and Lee Kotick of the Bottom Dollar Boys. Mickey interacted with national bluegrass figures such as championship flat-picker, Allen Shadd, noted mandolin player and songwriter, Larry Rice, and bluegrass innovator, David Grisman (the Dawg). Besides his work in Panhandle String Band, Mickey teaches for the Tallahassee Youth Symphony, is the assistant director for the Tallahassee Fiddlers, teaches around twenty-five to thirty students privately, and participates in a duo with Florida dulcimer champion, Aaron O'Rourke.

Mickey's enjoyment of and talent for communicating with people about his love of bluegrass is not only evinced in his dedicated, energetic playing, but also in his innate talent for music promotion. This talent apparently stems from a respect and enjoyment of

all types of people, regardless of their level of skill or professional development. As previously noted, he has assiduously sought out well-known and respected mentors for the group. One of the ways in which he has been able to do this has been by promoting the Tallahassee bluegrass scene in general. Through his connection with Lee Kotick of the Bottom Dollar Boys, Mickey was able to help with a bluegrass benefit for Larry Rice in Christmas of 2004. Nationally-renowned musicians from bluegrass came out to support Larry Rice. These musicians included Larry Rice, Tony Rice, Wyatt Rice, Frank Poindexter, Mark Johnson, and David Grisman.

As a result of his acquaintance with David Grisman at last year's concert, Mickey has done some promotional writing for David Grisman, and hopes to do more in the future. Besides being able to help out a musician who he looked up to, Mickey learned a lot from playing and interacting with these musicians. In March of this year, Mickey helped with a benefit Larry gave as thanks to the Tallahassee community for last year's concert. He wrote a press release and passed out flyers as well as preparing to perform at the concert with Panhandle String Band. Besides promotion and relationship-building with national bluegrass musicians, Mickey maintains associations with established figures in the Tallahassee bluegrass jamming scene. In addition, he has given talented young, high school pickers opportunities to open for Panhandle String Band.

While Mickey stresses improvisation and innovation as an important part of the musical trademark of Panhandle String Band, in some ways, his ideas on teaching and learning bluegrass are traditional. First of all, he respects the old time fiddling tradition, and has remarked upon the importance of learning fiddle tunes in a certain way. A case in point is his observation that the Tallahassee area is a good place to learn fiddle tunes.

“[There is] a lot of old time fiddling around these parts. Being southern Georgia, Northern Florida, Alabama, you got the guys that have learned fiddle tunes the right way.” Second of all, he acknowledges in his own history the importance of learning traditional bluegrass from Gordon Scott. Mickey is more likely to notate an arrangement of an established fiddle tune for his students, than to write out changes for the band.

Mickey’s ideals and learning practices indicate that, like PSB’s two-fold aim of respect for tradition and creativity, Mickey’s learning in bluegrass/new grass has also been a bridge between old and new ideas. A term paper he wrote in college on bluegrass entitled “A Tradition of Innovation” verbally underlines this concept. Moreover, during our interviews, Mickey consistently pointed out how, in his view, Bill Monroe, the artist upon whose music traditional bluegrassers base their claims of authenticity, was an innovator. In his own learning habits, he forefronts the concept of innovation. He learns from CDs by new grass figures like Tony Rice, Larry Rice, and David Grisman, and has sought out opportunities to learn from these artists first-hand.

Within the band, Mickey takes on a number of roles. While emphasizing the importance of listening and concentration during rehearsal, he makes it clear that the enjoyment of rehearsals and good feeling among the members of the band is paramount. His specific activities include playing lead guitar and mandolin, writing songs, compiling the information for the website, helping with the CD, and booking shows and private parties.

Mickey’s approach during rehearsal is methodical as well as creative. Once he finds a lick, transition, or arrangement that works, he will practice that until it is second nature. Once the musical idea is second nature, he is better able to improvise confidently

and comfortably. During performance, he alternates arranged sections with improvised sections. His successful personal relationships and promotional style also evince this balance of hard preparation and easy delivery. From the above information, it can be inferred that Mickey's learning and performing styles and his vision for Panhandle String Band combine freedom and control, originality and authenticity.

Kevin

Kevin Robertson, 27, gives a laid-back appearance with reddish hair commonly pulled back in a pony-tail. He is quiet without being timid. He answers questions thoughtfully and creatively, building his ideas one on top of the other, often answering questions before they are asked. Our interview took place in his living room.

Kevin has always wanted to be a guitar player and play in a band. His earliest recollections of guitar-playing are of playing around with a tiny yellow, nylon-string, at the age of two and a half. He says his mother has pictures of him at age three or four "playing" with the band at Faith Fellowship in Tallahassee, a church he describes as a "Jesus hippie kind of a church." Kevin's preference for jamming with others evidently started early.

Although music was always around the house (his mother plays the cello and his father had a guitar), Kevin really began learning guitar from a friend in his neighborhood who had an amplifier and a solid body electric guitar. He continued to play at friends' houses, and his freshman year in high school he took a class in guitar from Julia Price at Lincoln High School. Her methods included note-reading and flat-picking. At that time, Kevin was more interested in learning rock tunes from his friends in class than formal schooling. Therefore, he acquired more information about Led Zeppelin and Black

Sabbath than bluegrass. He bought a series of guitars, and learned blues and rock songs of recordings in his room every afternoon.

When he was sixteen or seventeen, Kevin went to his first bluegrass festival. Kevin saw Gordon Scott there, and was impressed by the high level of fast picking guitar playing at the festival. Always concerned about improving the level of his playing, Kevin began buying bluegrass CDs and learning tunes. By the time he was in his twenties, Kevin had seen more festivals, had become friends with Mickey, and had spent time at Gordon's String Music learning and playing music. Mickey showed Kevin some of the things he'd learned from Gordon. Kevin and Mickey shared ideas with each other. Kevin took a few lessons from Gordon, but mostly he spent time listening, watching, and jamming with Mickey and Gordon, and he practiced four to five hours a day on his own. Kevin started working at the store too, and after a few years of intensive study, eventually became a teacher.

In many ways, Kevin's development as a musician mirrors the development of the Panhandle String Band. He started working full-time at the store, teaching, and performing regularly with the band all within the same year (2003). However, Kevin has also participated in other ensembles including the Florida State University Irish Fiddling Ensemble and local Grateful Dead-inspired band, the Dead Keys.

Kevin's top eight favorite recordings highlight his varied musical influences, and also shares many commonalities with Mickey's musical interests:

- 1) Allman Brothers, *Live at the Fillmore East*, the newly released edition with extra tracks.
- 2) The Tony Rice Unit, *Manzanita*
- 3) The David Grisman Quintet, self-titled
- 4) David Grisman and Tony Rice *Tone Poems 1*
- 5) Eric Clapton, *From the Cradle*

- 6) Grateful Dead, *From the Mars Hotel*
- 7) Bobby Hix, *Federal Patch*
- 8) The Beatles, *Abbey Road*

Kevin indicates that his playing often changes according to his musical influences, and that both he and Mickey notice these changes:

What I just got done listening to can directly influence and change what I am going to play right after that. Mickey will say that too, about me ... He'll go "I can tell you've been listening to Dwayne Allman because of the way you've been playing the past hour on your guitar." Or he'll say you know, I can tell you've been listening to Tony today.

Kevin speaks about music learning as an apprenticeship where the journeyman watches and learns from the master musician. For this to occur, the journeyman must learn by observation and repetition. For him, memorizing is an important part of learning to improvise and to interact musically with other members of the band. Kevin's playing reflects his philosophy of music transmission. He memorizes everything, and emphasizes improvisation during performance. Gordon Scott, Jane Scott, and Mike Snelling all have pointed out that Kevin's song interpretations vary with each performance. Kevin emphasizes that this is part and parcel of his and the band's creative philosophy:

Because it's not written out and we're not relying upon written down music...then it does leave a lot of interaction, a lot of creativity, improvisation to happen as a band... A lot of instrumental bands-bluegrass, jazz bands, blues bands-they'll never play the same song twice.

Now that he has become a teacher, Kevin has in his own words, "come full circle," and has acquired skills in notation. He sometimes uses theory as a tool, but it is not his first choice. Within the band, Kevin often plays rhythm guitar, writes tunes, improvises, and works on performance logistics such as sound equipment and scheduling, musical and his interviewing styles can be described as extemporaneous and intuitive. At the same time, his commitment to continual practice and improvement is strong.

Mike

Mike Snelling, 52, bassist, is a soft-spoken, assured person with long, straight grey hair in a pony tail, glasses, and a beard. Mike has a bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in chemistry, and works as a chemist for the water department. Our interview took place in his laboratory among his equipment and also in the conference room of the water department. Despite his diverse accomplishments, Mike does not look to be center of attention, and clearly would rather not be talking about himself. Yet, he answers all questions thoroughly and thoughtfully.

Mike was born in Youngstown, Ohio, but his family moved to Charlotte, NC shortly after he was born. He was introduced to music was through choir at the Baptist church, and took two years of violin lessons in elementary school. His primary early training was in piano: Mike took nine years of piano lessons (3rd through 11th grade). By the time he finished lessons, he could sight read easily.

In high school, Mike became interested in rock and roll, and taught himself to play the guitar by ear. By his freshman year of college at University of Miami, Mike's musical attention was focused on the guitar. He learned the guitar by listening to recordings of country blues players like as Mississippi John Hurt and Blind Blake. Eventually, Mike left college, and moved to the Washington, D.C area. D.C. of the early 70s provided a rich initiation into the world of bluegrass for Mike. Besides being connected geographically and culturally with the Shenandoah Valley, there were many high-quality bands and venues in the city. Mike worked at a music store selling instruments, albums, and 45s. Mike's interest in bluegrass was hooked, but although he practiced on his own, he did not perform.

Moving to Tallahassee in 1986 to complete his degree in biology at FSU was a turning point in Mike's life and his participation in bluegrass. He met his best friend at a bluegrass jam at the Pearl Oyster Bar, and became acquainted with many of the members of the bluegrass community. Mike's story of his acquaintance with the bass provides a telling look at the combination of friendship, creativity, and musicianship which characterizes Mike experience and outlook.

In 1988, Mike was asked to house-sit for a friend who decided to move to Hawaii for an unspecified length of time. Inside the house was an upright base which was used by the infrequent bass player that happened to stop by for a jamming session. About a year after he moved in, he got a call from a friend of his, Tracy Perez, asking him to be in a band that he was starting.

I said, "Great, Tracy, when would you like me to start?" He said, "Well, I want you to play bass." I said, "I don't play bass." He said "We're going to give you six months. We think you are a good enough musician. We think you can do it."

In the ensuing six months, Mike did learn the bass. In the process, he discovered that the bass was the perfect instrument for him: "I fell in love with the bass, and I was really sorry I hadn't started it 20 years before." After this initial project, Restless Waters, Mike played and/or recorded in a number of bands such as Blue and Lonesome, the Mark Leadon Band, Singing Biscuit, and Mimi Hearn and the Hearndogs.

A particular highlight of Mike's career was playing bass for Nancy Moore, a young bluegrass singer discovered and sponsored by Tom T. and Dixie Hall. In the course of working with Moore and the Halls, Mike played with Allen Shadd and Gordon Scott, and appeared twice at the International Bluegrass Music Association's Fan Fest. The annual gathering includes a wide variety of people connected with bluegrass: famous

performers, fans, producers, luthiers, and DJ's. The event is an excellent opportunity for professional and musical exposure for any bluegrass musician. As a part of his work with Tom T. and Dixie, Mike recorded demos for Nancy Moore, and also performed in a Grand Ole Opry touring show in Tampa which included thirty Grand Ole Opry stars. (Among those he mentioned are Jeanie Sealey, Jim Ed Brown, and Kitty Wells.) This was a meaningful experience for him because of the spirit of music and friendship which he observed in these famous country musicians:

Me and Allen we had to go change, and in the dressing room these old guys. They were all sitting in a circle waiting for their turn to go onstage cause they all go up and do one song. They would just pass the guitar around, and everybody would do a song, and if you wanted to jump in with harmony, they did. It was so wonderful to see, all these old Opry stars still sitting down in a circle, passing the guitar around, enjoying it.

Since high school, Mike's philosophy on formal vs. informal musical training has been a practical one. For instance, when he was 17, he could sight read on the piano, but could not improvise on it. At the same time, he could improvise on the guitar, but could not read. According to Mike, past bluegrassers learned music by listening to records and playing. As bluegrass became more established, the standard tunes were written down. Today, musicians like he, Mickey, and Kevin will use charts if necessary. The following remark demonstrates Mike's inclusive approach:

Any tool you can use to improve the way you communicate your music to people is a valid tool, whether that means going to the Berklee school of music or spending a year walking the Appalachian Trail with your dulcimer. If it helps you communicate better, I think it's valid.

Mike's inventive use and creation of musical tools is also evinced in the decisions he makes while performing. A story about a recent gig Mike had with David Greer, a famous acoustic guitar player, illustrates this point:

[David] does not like to play with monitors. Being the bass player, I was behind these guys, and I had a really difficult time onstage hearing what was going on. So, thank goodness, David Greer's left foot is in time! I played with his left foot. I totally concentrated on that the entire six songs.

His listening habits are equally eclectic. Of late, he tends to purchase CDs of musicians he admires in order to study the bass. Such musicians include Paul Chambers, the Blind Boys of Alabama, and Danny Thomas. He also listens to a lot of Irish music, old bluegrass, old country, and new grass.

Because of his focus on new ideas and inventiveness in musical approaches, Mike's playing philosophy is clearly in line with that of Mickey and Kevin. Mike also allows for the creativity of the other members of the ensemble, by playing a crucial role of rhythmic and harmonic support. The role suits his personality because he would rather not be a soloist. Playing the bass is attractive to Mike precisely for that reason. He can enjoy performing with a group without having to be the center of attention: "The melody and the comfort level of the soloist are of utmost importance to me."

Mike is well-regarded among the Tallahassee bluegrass community. In fact, Mickey, Kevin, Jane Scott, and Gordon Scott all said that "everyone wants Mike to be in their band" because he is an excellent musician, extremely professional, and an all-around nice guy. While both Mike and Kevin have pointed out that they value Mike's expertise, he does not conceive of himself as an advisor for the group. When asked if he ever acts as a teacher, Mike responds, "I can put in my two cents worth, and they can listen or they don't listen and actually the best learning experience is to go through it yourself." Thus, Mike adds his voice to the musical discussion, and provides support for the group while leaving the more visible leadership roles to Mickey and Kevin.

Jason McMillan was a mandolin player for the group. He is of medium height and short hair dark. He writes a lot of songs, sometimes solos or plays a duet with Mickey on the mandolin, and sometimes plays the mandolin chop. Jason is an artist and designed the logo and CD cover art for the band. He and Mickey worked together to order, and distribute the CD. Jason's PA system is the one that the band uses, and often he or Kevin will work on EQ'ing. Jason is leaving the band due to the birth of his second child, and has been unavailable for comment.

As stated before, both common and complimentary threads emerge from these biographies. Common threads include hard work, musicality, friendship, eclectic/new grass musical influences, self-motivation and education, improvisation, and boundary-stretching. Complimentary threads include differing personalities and musical roles as well as diverse learning and playing styles. A discussion of the band's history and dynamics will show how these threads interweave to create a unified, innovative band.

Band History

Beginnings

Kevin and Mickey met each other at Springfest and at several other venues, concerts, and jams about six years ago. The musical chemistry between Mickey and Kevin was there from the very first time they jammed. They hung out together, spent time at Gordon String Music where Mickey was working, and shared CDs and musical ideas. It seemed almost inevitable that Mickey and Kevin would create a new grass band. As their eclectic, but similar influences would indicate, Mickey and Kevin were both interested in attaining bluegrass technical proficiency while at the same time pushing

back the boundaries of what is considered blue grass. Later, Mickey and Kevin met Jason and a banjo player named Dustin. The four began jamming together regularly.

Because of Mickey's teaching and networking, Kevin working at the store, the support of Gordon and Jane Scott of Gordon's String Music, and Kevin and Mickey's good reputation from three years of jamming at community events and festivals, momentum built towards the formation of a more official group. Both Kevin and Mickey point out that one of the best things about the group was that it was created due to the evolution of a musical friendship. Mickey maintains that members of the Tallahassee bluegrass community encouraged the formation of the band:

This band came about as just hanging around picking with some friends that I had met. We were always kind of creative guys. We were always writing tunes...And then, as we played more, we started going to a couple of open mikes together just to test out some of the tunes. Other people in the bluegrass community would ask us, "When are you guys playing?" "When is your band playing" because they knew that Kevin and I were doing some hot picking, and they wanted to find out when our band was playing.

What's in a name?

Mickey cannot remember specifically when the name, Panhandle String Band was chosen, but the choice plainly reflects an effort to connect with the history of bluegrass:

Mickey: We chose Panhandle String Band because it felt like you might have been able to have heard of it before. It had a little bit of girth and history already associated with it so it doesn't sound like it was new. It had a lot of class to it.

Gabrielle: So, are you trying to link [the band] to some kind of regional music tradition?

Mickey: Definitely, that's also in the bluegrass tradition. I think more than rock n roll people would geographically associate their band. Even the conception of bluegrass music itself was named after the Bluegrass of Kentucky...Bluegrass musicians tend to really respect locations both in

the song titles, album titles, band titles. They're very proud of where they came from, where they want their music lineage to go.

By connecting with a tradition of bluegrass regional names, not only does the name Panhandle String Band show respect for bluegrass traditions as a whole, but it also directly claims a connection with the local bluegrass scene. This type of choice illustrates the group's ability to facilitate community support through a strong linkage with regional identity.

First Show at the Warehouse

By the time the group performed their first show at the Warehouse (around 2002 or 2003), Dustin, the banjo player had moved away, and the band invited Shelley, a violinist, to play with the band. Because of the Mickey's, Kevin's, and Gordon Scott's contacts within the community, and the general momentum built up from three years of jamming with community members, the band managed to pack the Warehouse their first time out. Both Kevin and Mickey said that they were amazed at the crowd response, and that the warm response and energy that they received from the crowd on that first show impelled the band to perform regularly. The first show at the Warehouse motivated PSB to stretch its musical skills and to develop new material. Mickey recalls, "We were immediately addicted -to see the possibilities. And from that moment on we started doing local shows like once a month and incorporating friends of ours to open up for us."

Meeting Mike

Mickey and Kevin fondly recall how Mike Snelling became a part of the Panhandle String Band. Mike first heard Kevin play at party and "was totally blown away." Mike made a point of introducing himself to Kevin, and went to hear the band at

the Warehouse. The band invited Mike over to Mickey's to jam after the concert.

Mickey remembers:

We just asked him to come by and jam one time like after a concert and said, 'Come by and bring your bass.' And that was like the end of it. We picked a few and sang a few. And Mike said, 'You know, you guys have that picking thing down.'

About a week later, Kevin and Mike bumped into each other browsing through new grass CDs at Borders. Because of Mike's reputation as a bassist, and the positive experience they had had jamming together, Kevin gave Mike his phone number and invited him to a practice. As with the chemistry between Kevin and Mike, the connection between Mike and the Panhandle String Band was instantaneous. Mike's memory of that practice and how he became to be part of PSB, shows evinces that connection from his perspective:

Mike: They were playing the bluegrass standards I'd played for fifteen years, but they were playing them with a new energy, and a new love for the music, and it just really made me feel good, and also happy that some younger folks were getting involved... About two days later, Kevin called me on the phone and said, 'Mike, we were talking. We had made a pact between ourselves that we were not going to have any old guys in the group, but we decided to make an exception in your case.' He said, 'We'd really love for you to join us and play with us.' I think that's a compliment.

Festivals

Mike's participation added necessary rhythmic and harmonic foundation to the band. The group performed a few times with all five members to enthusiastic community response. Then, for personal and professional reasons Shelley left the band. Enough momentum had built up by this time that the band was able to restructure and move forward. The band gradually became recognized for high-quality acoustic instrumental music among members of the Tallahassee traditional music. This resulted in invitations to perform at increasingly prestigious festivals. Panhandle String Band has performed three

times at the Florida Folk Festival, as well as at Magfest, Springfest, and Down on the Farm. The band takes the responsibility of maintaining and improving their playing at the festivals seriously. In fact, participation in festivals has been one way to motivate and monitor the musical and professional progress of the band:

Mickey: Having been invited to some of the more major festivals, getting a chance to play with some of the best musicians in the world, we've been very conscious of being very mindful of our set, and not playing stuff that is over our heads, that we can't handle, and haven't practiced...We always try to tighten the screws. Make it sound better and tighter and more what we had wanted it to, but never had a reason to because we weren't playing Magnolia Fest and Spring Fest. But when you go there the bands are not hacking. They're doing a great job. We didn't want to go down there and hack. We wanted to go down there and do what we knew we could do.

Hanglider's Lullaby

As PSB began to perform at more festivals, venues, and private parties, they developed a following within the community, and decided to release their first CD. The CD was produced digitally at Mickey's house using Cakewalk. Mattresses were placed between each band member in order to separate each instrument's sound from the other as much as possible. This effort to induce separation was probably made in order to give an aural impression of a multi-track recording. The recording was done completely live, with no overdubbing. That meant that the band had to get the whole tune down on the first take. If anyone perceived problem with the take, the band had to re-record the whole song. Mike was initially wary of this procedure, because he had participated in studio recordings where each instrument was recorded individually on separate tracks. He says that he later changed his mind and that recording live added extra excitement to the project. While Mickey would like the band to make a studio recording, he acknowledges that the live, do-it-yourself manner of *Hanglider's Lullaby* gave the CD a special

“homespun” quality. Being “homespun” assists in the band’s aim for an artistic authenticity linked with its community-embedded status:

Mickey: It has a certain sound that an expensive studio can’t reproduce. [D]oing that made our music sound a certain way. That could not have been reproduced and captured... I wouldn’t mind doing it homespun again. I think that’s what draws a lot of people into what we do, is that we’re excellent musicians for Tallahassee, but we still have a very homespun kind of thing going on.

Present and Future

Recently, the band played at ? The Ultimate Bluegrass at the Moon in Tallahassee along with local bands and a number of bluegrass names like Mark Johnson, Frank Poindexter, Larry Rice and Tony Rice. Also, a set of Larry Rice tunes with Larry Rice at the Suwannee SpringFest to positive response. Future engagements include the 4th Annual Florida State Bluegrass, The Rising Talent Showcase at the Florida Folk Festival, and the Gamble Rogers Folk Festival. Mickey has also talked about the band recording a CD at a studio this year. Yet, he admits that it is hard to predict what will happen in the future. As was previously noted, Jason is expecting the birth of his second child and is therefore leaving the band. Mickey, Kevin, and Mike already jam together separately from the band. Maybe there is a Panhandle String Trio in the offing.

The band’s history shows that band members shared many similarities including an appreciation for new grass eclecticism and an enjoyment as music as a part of friendship. In addition, band members met through a common participation in Tallahassee community/ bluegrass festival musical and social events. Band members have diverse learning and performing styles, personalities, and roles within the band. These commonalities and complimentary differences synergize to create band dynamics.

Band Dynamics

Musical Decisions and Roles

Kevin and Mike both remarked that musical decisions are made by consensus. For instance, the band decides together whether to incorporate a new arrangement or song into their set. As has been shown, the consensus comes about because the band members have fairly defined roles that suit each member's strengths and personality. Mickey, Kevin, and Jason write songs. Mike does not write songs, but writes his own bass lines. He is open and appreciative of other band members' writing, and chooses his input carefully. When he does give his two cents, other band members listen. Says Kevin, "If Mike knocks down an idea, we know that he's right."

Mickey often takes the lead in focusing the band during rehearsal. Given his role as promoter, he is keenly aware of the necessity to improve the musicianship and creativity of the band. Since the band has been performing in the more prestigious festivals, this role has become more emphasized. For instance, in the following quotation Mickey talks about a decision to concentrate on original rather than standard repertory. From his phrasing, it can be inferred that Mickey's vision in this regard held some sway:

We took songs out of our set that I felt we were not interpreting as creatively as other ones ... We concentrated more on our original tunes preparing for those festivals, and less on bluegrass standards ... Having been invited to some of the major festivals, getting a chance to play with some of the best musicians in the world, we've been very conscious of being very mindful of our set, and not playing stuff that is over our heads, that we can't handle, and haven't practiced... We wanted to go down there and do what we knew we could do.

Member performance roles underline how the band operates. Mickey plays lead guitar or mandolin, and Kevin may solo, play lead, or play rhythm guitar. Jason may

play the mandolin chop, he may solo, or he may duet with Mickey. Mike lays a solid harmonic and rhythmic foundation for the group. Jason's CD cover design provides a visual representation of the band member's musical roles. He criss-crosses two guitars and a mandolin over a supporting bass.

Tuned Percussion

A unique aspect of the performance of group dynamics is how the group creates a rhythmic drive. Mike calls his bass foundation "tuned percussion." Mike's foundation combined with the off-beat chop of the mandolin and the consistency of the rhythm guitar keeps the drive going. Mike emphasizes while his role is important that the drive is really a group effort:

One person cannot keep a whole group together. If people are speeding up and slowing down there's many times where the bass player gets blamed or the rhythm guitar player, but in my experience that's just not true. It's a group effort going down or speeding up. The fact is, if one person realizes it's happening, just because that one person tries to push it, and everyone else isn't there, then it doesn't work, and it ends up falling apart because one person is trying to push it, speed it up, and everybody else is staying where they think is right. So, that's a big part of rehearsal for us, is starting at one tempo and ending at the same tempo. And to me, that's the most challenging thing about this music, ... the key to everything is the groove, you know the beat, the tempo, that's what gets people's toes tapping, it's not how many notes you're playing, or how beautiful it is, it's that, we got to keep that going.

PSB evinced this group rhythmic effort during recent performances at the Warehouse and the Moon. A funky drive is indeed one of the salient characteristics of the band's performances.

Nonverbal communication

The band communicates nonverbally in a variety of ways. The nature of these nonverbal communications changes vary according to the venue. For instance,

movements and eye contact among band members were conveyed with a different manner during rehearsal as opposed to performance. During the rehearsal I observed, the band rehearses stood in a circle, creating an intimate energy which could not be created when performing for an audience. Gestures are subtle and tempos are easier. Cueing one another seemed like a friendly chat around a campfire. During performances, the band uses minimal body or facial movements except an occasional head or shoulder movement to express the music. Players hand off to one another and coordinate transitions and cadences using eye contact. When band members duet, they lean towards one another and make eye contact. This creates moments of conversation and contrast. Transferred to the stage, the friendly chat from the rehearsal becomes a dynamic discourse. The overall impression is of relaxed, yet confident playing.

The sense of intense listening to one another was the same during PSB's rehearsals as in their performances. Their listening creates a palpable energy that can be felt by audiences. Mike describes a directional dimension of listening:

There are certain musical cues that I listen for, to help me keep my place. As a matter of fact, I've gotten confused a couple of times onstage. I'm so used to hearing Mickey on my left that when Mickey is placed in a monitor on my right, because Kevin always stands on my right, the sound from the speakers I hear Mickey on my right side, I forget that's Mickey, and I think it's Kevin and if I'm waiting for a Mickey cue, then I'll miss it because I'm hearing Mickey from the right side, and I associate that physically with Kevin.

A change in a band members' direction throws Mike off, indicating that Mike has become attuned to others in the group. That he unconsciously associates specific band members with specific directions further suggests intensified listening.

Music Structures

Set lists are determined prior to the performance. The band alternates arranged and improvised passages. How each player remembers the sequences and changes is self determined. Mickey and Kevin memorize arranged passages through repetition. As mentioned before, both players are more likely to use theory for pedagogical purposes and arranging than for performing with the band. Because Mike has a lot of musical commitments, he usually needs written changes to jog his memory. In addition, he uses his charts to mentally practice when he does not have access to his bass.

When asked to describe how the band structures their music, Mickey, Kevin, and Mike each described the situation differently. Mickey talked about arranged versus solo passages. Kevin narrated how he would play 'Biolondo' from start to finish. Mike charted chord changes. While each described the structures differently, their methods of structuring music are compatible.

Personal Relationship

As previously noted, the musical chemistry was good for the band members from the beginning. To members of PSB, this musical chemistry interrelates with their friendships with one another. During practice, band members may take time to talk, have a beer, etc. This easy atmosphere is highly valued by the band members and fosters success within the Tallahassee traditional music community:

Kevin: We hang out at practice and kind of party. It was never excessive, but we do that. That's part of the aspect of what we've always done. It's kind of just a kind of friendly, enjoy hang out and pick, that turned into a band, that started to play, and on a pretty high level. It just kind of happened accidentally.

Mickey: We're pretty laid back about band practice ... I think that is one of the successes that we have. I've had friends that are much more into

making it, and they're still trying to play at the venues that we're playing. ... We're just having fun and hanging out and playing the music that we like to play and getting the successes just because.

Mickey and Kevin's nearly identical remarks further evince their close mindset. When asked whether he first connected musically or personally with the other band members, Kevin remarked that the personal and musical aspects of their friendship began because of shared musical interests. Despite their laid-back message, the band's friendship centers around a mutual dedication to the music. Mike explains;

It's the first group of people I've ever played with that really just about no matter what happened during the day how hard they had to work or how bad they feel when it's time for Panhandle String Band, they kind of toss all that aside, and they're ready to play, and by the end of the night its so much fun. There's nights when I get home from work here, and ... I don't know if I can do it! I'm so beat. Then, I get in the car, and by the time I get to Mickey or Kevin's house, I'm just so thrilled to be there ... I'm so excited when I get home about 11:30, that most nights I have to stay up until 1:00 p.m. reading.

Mike later asserts that one of the most important parts of a musical group is a shared dedication to improving and expanding musicianship. PSB's friendship evolved from their love of music.

Band Sound

Mickey used the title "A Tradition of Innovation" as a term paper in college on bluegrass prior to the formation of Panhandle String Band. In the paper, he argues that the genre of bluegrass started as a result of Bill Monroe's innovations. So, innovation is an important part of the tradition of bluegrass. This linkage of the past and the future has played an important part in creating a distinctive aural niche for Panhandle String Band. The band shows respect for the past by arranging Bill Monroe standards and fiddle tunes,

playing on acoustic bluegrass instruments, using bluegrass picking styles, and performing in bluegrass venues.

PSB sound reflects a progressive orientation by foregrounding songwriting. This commitment to developing their own material is one of the ideas uniting members of the band. Kevin, Mickey, and Jason write songs. Mike enjoys having the opportunity to work with songwriters because it allows him artistic freedom and stretches his musicianship:

In Panhandle it's a totally new song, new chord progressions. Rhythmic stuff with them is everything. And it's something you can't do with traditional bluegrass. The bass part especially is just boom, boom... That's it for three hours ... And that's okay, the fellowship of all that, but that's not Panhandle.

Mike enjoys participating in the band because he can improve his musicianship. In fact, PSB is known for high-quality instrumentals, and is the only exclusively instrumental bluegrass band in the Tallahassee area. Mickey indicates a particular vision for PSB's instrumentals:

What I try to do is have my instrumental music tell a story... I'm very conscious of having the music have a singer, but the singer is not singing words, so to speak. ... It helps to have music fans sitting there listening. And when they sit there and listen, I'd like to be able to take them on a journey.

Finally, the band acquires its distinctive sound by combining a number of musics. New grass from the 1960s incorporated jazz, rock, blues, klezmer, and Latin influences. PSB's sound evinces a similarly eclectic expanse of influences such as the Allman Brothers, Phish, the Grateful Dead, and Dream Theater. While aurally influenced by jam bands, PSB performance style does not reflect a jam band aesthetic. The band is especially influenced by David (the "Dawg") Grisman. Both Kevin and Mickey

emphasized that they play “Dawg” music. Dream Theatre, a progressive heavy metal band that uses complex arrangements, serves as an inspiration for experiment within the PSB’s arrangements.

Common and complimentary threads interweave the Panhandle String Band’s biographies, history, musical roles and memory structures, rhythmic framework, nonverbal communication, personal relationship and sound identity. As eluded to before, band members share similar dedications to enjoyment, improvement of musical skills, camaraderie, and innovative sounds, and are comfortable with diverse roles which have been established in the group.

Relationship to the Bluegrass Community

The previous sections have discussed how Panhandle String Band has created a unique musical identity based on commonalities and complimentary differences within the group. The band’s relationship to the community further evinces the synergetic interrelationship of similarities and differences. PSB’s relationship to the community will be discussed from three different perspectives: that of the band members, bluegrass community members, and conclusions drawn from my observations of two performances. Blacking’s conception of purist/authentic and syncretic/innovative elements of folk music discourse will help to clarify the dialogue.

Panhandle String Band members profess a complex conception of their relationship with the community. On the one hand, as their biographies, histories, and tunes show, the band stretches the boundaries of traditional bluegrass, and clearly embraces an innovative/syncretist orientation. Band members receive mixed messages from the community regarding some of their innovations. While innovative/syncretic

instrumentation, arrangement, and songwriting have brought the band success, these same artistic choices have distanced PSB from purist/traditionalist musicians in the Tallahassee bluegrass scene. PSB is not considered a bluegrass band. As a result, PSB members maintain that the band is sometimes left out of Tallahassee bluegrass events.

On the other hand, the band members acknowledge that their initiation to bluegrass and growth as bluegrass musicians grew out of community venues and festivals. Kevin recalls the importance that Springfest played in providing a goal for the band's growth:

I remember going to Springfest together as a band, seeing the bands play, writing our own material, playing, gradually making it bigger, and saying to ourselves, and saying to ourselves.... Man, it would be awesome if we could just play Springfest one day. Now it's happening.

Band members appreciate the role that community members like Gordon and Jane Scott have played in training, promoting, and encouraging the band. The band respects bluegrass traditions and players. Remarks Mike, "[Gordon] is really a great advocate for bluegrass music. Also, he probably forgot more songs than I ever learned." PSB enjoys having a common language of traditional tunes to play with other bluegrassers.

Mickey: Everyone plays the same standards pretty much around the country and the world. You can meet strangers that are banjo players, fiddle players, mandolin players and automatically play "Blackberry Blossom" and "The Wildwood Flower."

Furthermore, PSB musicians play with members of other groups at gigs and festivals, and sometimes ask members of the community to open for the band at Warehouse shows or to jam during PSB's set.

Community members' perception of the relationship is equally ambivalent. All of the community members interviewed stated, without prompting, that Panhandle String

Band was not a bluegrass band. Community members made this determination because PSB does not use all of the traditional bluegrass instruments, does not use vocals, performs new songs, and includes elements from other genres such as blues, rock, and jazz. This would indicate an authenticity/purist vs. innovation/syncretist tension in PSB's community relationship.

However, community members respected the musicianship of PSB and are proud of the band's accomplishments. According to Gordon Scott, Mickey plays licks and tunes he learned from Gordon better than Gordon does. Mickey and Kevin are known to be hard workers, and Mike is well-known and respected in the community. Jason is not as well-known in the community. Yet, Tallahassee musicians respect his playing. Tallahassee bluegrassers enjoy listening to or performing along with PSB at community events. They note that PSB has had a great deal of success at an early age, and that their innovative style has inspired younger players to become involved.

Interviews often forefronted an authentic/purist vs. innovative/syncretist dialectic. Yet, observations of two performances, Sounds of Suwannee at The Warehouse and The Ultimate Bluegrass Festival, illustrate that Tallahassee bluegrassers and PSB new grassers share what Blacking calls "moral" values. These moral values are musical values so much a part of the Tallahassee music culture that both Tallahassee bluegrassers and Panhandle String Band find them unnecessary to discuss.

The over-arching shared value is a community founded on respect for the bluegrass tradition. PSB and the Tallahassee bluegrassers know the standard repertory, play acoustic instruments, and use flat-picking. Because of this common tradition, the musicians have a common language to communicate through music. Thus, the music

conversation is founded on a sense of familiarity and friendship. Audiences are often amateur bluegrass musicians, so they are knowledgeable, attentive, and responsive. Bluegrass musicians from one band may sit in on another band's set. The bluegrass festival community has a "homespun" quality, a uniquely democratic, down-home manner. The Panhandle String Band is part of that community. Mickey elaborates:

Mickey: there is a certain kind of people that really think about the preservation of Americana music and delivering it the right way with the right kind of festival, and they have a lot of the same bands year in and year out, of course it changes also, the headliners and the different side stages, but a lot of the people have been coming to play at Magnolia fest for the past 10 years. And these people have really shaped the audience that comes back, and shaped the feeling of love and respect between the fans and the music and the place and the trees that keeps people coming back. And I'm glad I'm a part of that. I've been going there to see music for a long time, and to get to go there and supply the music to the people is special

Conclusion

An examination of Panhandle String Band's connections with bluegrass history, personal and group histories, roles, personal relationships, musical priorities and influences yields a three-fold explanation as to how the band successfully navigates authenticity/innovation discourses. First of all, the band maintains a reputation for excellent musicianship by committing to a unique creative vision, networking and performing with community members, listening intently to each other and to audience response, and building credibility, momentum, and energy for the band with each performance. So, even those who do not consider the band a bluegrass band respect the band's musicianship. Second of all, PSB traverses the authenticity/innovation discourse using the "homespun" bluegrass musical values it shares with the Tallahassee bluegrass community: knowledge of standard repertory, bluegrass instrumental picking styles, and

jamming sessions. These qualities can be attributed to the fact that the band grew out of and is supported by many members of the Tallahassee community. Compellingly, Panhandle String Band deals with the authenticity/innovation discourse by creating music that both acknowledges and expands outwardly from the tradition band members learned in the Tallahassee community.

Gabrielle: What do you think people hear when they listen to your performance[s] or recording[s]?

Mickey: They hear creativity. They also hear one foot deeply rooted in tradition with the headed foot headed towards what's possible.

Epilogue

Panhandle String Band in performance:

Duet between mandolins

*Jason is doing a fast solo with intricate licks.
some man in the back yells: "YEAH! Awesome!!" Jason looks, acknowledges.*

*Linkage with past, yet also forward thinking.
Music grows, changes in time*

Fast-paced- section of the piece ends with a sforzando.

*Now there is a soft rolling tempo (again with the funk)
Mandolin solos (Mickey)
Key changes from a lower modal sound to a higher, major key.*

*Kevin solos (on guitar)- low dynamic level, intense, limited contour.
Mickey taps his instrument for percussion (punctuating a key moment of intensity.)*

Kevin and Mickey –hand off- converse- compete-contrast sometimes-repeat and interpret- sometimes together

Mickey bridges into solo (and new key) Now it becomes a mandolin due again. Mickey solos. Jason solos. Intensity and joy. Each band member has a solo. Whistles and shouts.

Mickey bows, claps hands together and says "Thank you guys very much."

The Warehouse, January 28, 2006

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