

# BLUEGRASS BEACON

FALL 2017



**Chris Jones and the  
Night Drivers**

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Welcome to the Pacific Bluegrass and Heritage Society, formed in October 1980, to promote and foster the understanding and appreciation of traditional bluegrass and North American Old Time music.

We meet every Monday night at 7:30 pm at the ANZA Club, 3 West 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Vancouver BC. Entry fee on regular jam night is \$4.00 for members and \$6.00 for non-members. The first Monday of each Month we hold a Slow Pitch Jam hosted by Sue Malcolm and friends with entry fee of \$6.00 for members and \$8.00 for non-members. On the third Monday of each month, our main floor jam is dedicated to an old time music jam. During July and August we jam at nearby Trout Lake Monday evenings.

As part of our mandate, we encourage members to perform on "Open Stage" nights, which are held 3 to 4 times each year. Our next Open Stage night will be on December 18<sup>th</sup>, which is combined with our annual Christmas Potluck. If you would like to reserve your spot, please contact our Open Stage wrangler, Jamie Proctor at [jamie.proctor@hotmail.com](mailto:jamie.proctor@hotmail.com).

The PBHS recently hosted a fund raiser for COOP radio "In the Pines" with an evening of Bluegrass entertainment, which filled the house with amazing music. We are looking forward to two upcoming concerts in the new year at the ANZA club with "Chris Jones and the Night Drivers" from Nashville, performing on Monday Jan. 15<sup>th</sup> and "The Slocan Ramblers" from Toronto on Monday May 14<sup>th</sup>.

Watch our website: [www.Pacificbluegrass.ca](http://www.Pacificbluegrass.ca) for all upcoming events, and join us on Facebook I would like to offer a special thank you to Tim Bemister for his re-creation of our newsletter, and look forward to seeing more in the future, well done! Please feel free to contact Tim if you wish to contribute to an upcoming newsletter at: [Timbemister@yahoo.ca](mailto:Timbemister@yahoo.ca) **Fran Schiffner**

We're looking for a new logo and your ideas are welcome! Send your prototypes to [pacificbluegrass@yahoo.ca](mailto:pacificbluegrass@yahoo.ca)

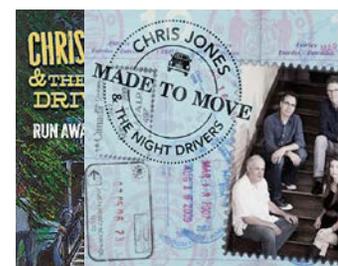


# Chris Jones and the Night Drivers



Chris Jones & the Night Drivers are on their way to Vancouver to play at the Anza Club on January 15<sup>th</sup>. The band has been busy with a European tour over the summer, playing in Bluegrass festivals in Switzerland and Germany with Mountain Home Music Company label mates Balsam Range. They are supporting their latest release “Made to Move” which features their new banjo player, Gina Clowes. The band’s last release “Run Away Tonight” included the single “Laurie”, which spent six weeks atop the Bluegrass Today’s weekly airplay chart. This promises to be a great night at the Anza Club. Don’t miss it.

**LIVE AT THE ANZA CLUB JANUARY  
15<sup>th</sup>**





## How I Spent My Summer Vacation

For all you folks curious about Nimble Fingers I spoke to our very own Tim Higgs, a double dippin' mainstay of the camp.

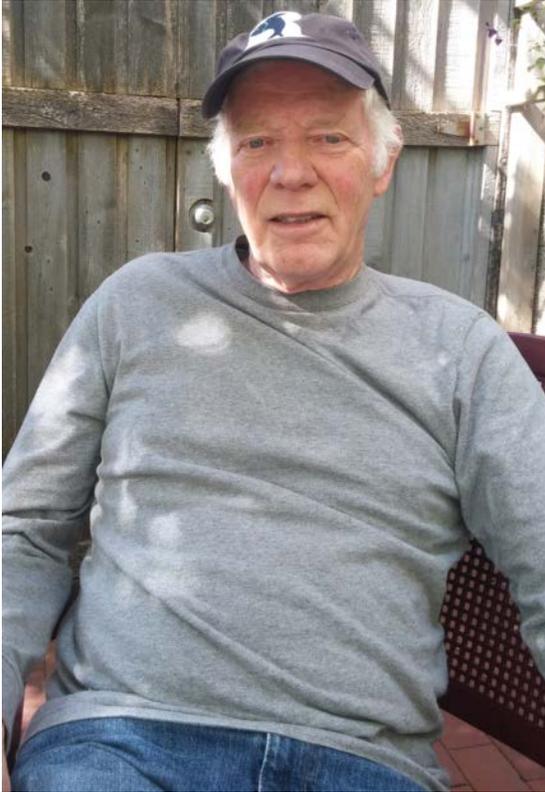
TIM B: Hi Tim. Thanks for talking to us. Can you tell us a little bit about your start as a fiddle player.

TIM H: I took some lessons in strings in school as a kid for a few years, and I didn't follow it that far, and never practiced that much and never got very good. Then along came the 60's folk era. I wanted to be cool so I played banjo, not stupid violin you know. I didn't play any music at all for decades. Then I had a kid in school and she took up the violin in a strings program in school and I got the bug again, so I actually went and took lessons in Vancouver. This was all reading notes on a page, what people call classical. The teacher was a guy who played in the VSO and his lessons got me going again. Then another kid came along and I got too busy so another 20 or 30 years of no music at all basically. But then when I was around 60 years old, through people at work who were playing folky, bluegrassy music, I sort of got the bug again. People said 'Gee, you used to play fiddle? You could play our kind of music.' So I picked it up again, and mainly I started going to the Anza and that's really the one constant factor. As you know that means bluegrass, but also old timey and pop, Beatles songs and blues and everything else. It's what you would call improvisational, not reading notes on a page or not following the script, and that's what I like playing the most.

TIM B: How long have you been attending Nimble Fingers?

TIM H: I think it was my 8<sup>th</sup> year this year. I heard about it from all the enthusiastic people at the bluegrass club who had gone there and really liked, so I went up and gave it a try, and I obviously liked it because I've gone every year for 8 consecutive years.

TIM B: So you spent two weeks at Sorrento this year.



TIM H: When I did my usual thing last January when they announced the classes and the instructors at Nimble Fingers, I tried to decide on a schedule and I was having a hard time and it sort of dawned on me- I'm retired, so why not go for both weeks. I like one, I'll probably like two, and so I did. Somewhere about two days into the second week last year I began thinking "I wonder ----?" is it already too much bluegrass camp. That was a short-lived feeling and I enjoyed the whole two weeks and this year I went back and I enjoyed the full camp again.

TIM B: Have you noticed any changes over the time you've been going?

TIM H: The main thing I've noticed, and I notice this going to the Anza Club every Friday night as well, it seems like it's really popular now but old timey music

didn't exist 10 years ago. And I thought 'wow', because I played hammer banjo as a kid. Now this is 2008 or something, and then suddenly I don't know if it was the 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?' movie or something, but the time was right, and suddenly a whole lot of young and old people started pulling the music out of the closet. Mostly a bunch of young people started embracing it and within a couple years they started offering the old time fiddle or old time banjo classes at Nimble Fingers. Now it's popular and as far as the bluegrass society goes they had to be reminded it was the bluegrass and heritage music society, sort of legal you know. At Nimble Fingers now, there are maybe 4 or 5 classes out of the 20, old time fiddle old time claw hammer banjo. That certainly a Sorrento change I see.

TB: What's an average day like at Nimble Fingers?

TH: You never get off campus. You are there for five days and you are busy all the time. You've got the lessons, and the bonus of official concerts two or three nights of the week, put on by the instructor/professional musicians, which are typically three half hour sets woven into a concert, by artists like John Reishman, whom you would typically pay good money to go and see. They're wonderful because they are really informal concerts in intimate settings with good sound, which you don't always get at a big concert hall when you pay your good money to see the group when they come to town. And then there's what they call the workshops, two one hour blocks in the afternoon, which sometimes are like mini-concerts, with discussions and presentations. So the day fills up with lessons, workshops and concerts, and then the rest of the time it's meeting other people, playing music and jamming. You're going

on till two or three am and the problem is, you've got to get to bed and get some sleep because you've got a lesson in the morning. If there is a break in the day you can catch a half hour nap.

TB: Have you thought about the difference between taking weekly lessons, stretched out over months, verses the immersive and intensive week of lessons at Nimble Fingers?



TH: It's quite different, isn't it, but I tend not to do the former as I don't have a teacher in town that I take lessons from. It's may be because of where I am, in my music, at my age, it's a casual, fun thing for me. I'm not trying to get better and better so that I can be a pro, like a young person might, or a serious musician who is really picking this up as a professional path. I've been playing the violin long enough on and off, and I've had some lessons, so I don't feel I need a lesson every week. I need to play a bunch. Non the less, it's really useful once in a while, to go off and spend a week with somebody who will see you lots and can really zero in on some funny bad habits you have. I don't feel lessons are wasted on me but it just works better to have the occasionally. It may well be that if somebody is more of a beginner they would want a lesson every week, because there may be lots of things they want to get going on. I find the intensive suits me, as you have one teacher who sees you playing a whole bunch and can really get to know your style, and you learn a lot from the other students.

TB: Can a novice go to Nimble Fingers and benefit from the lessons?

TH: If you mean someone who has never played before, not so much. Most of the people, who go up there at the beginner level, have had some exposure and, at least, have dabbled in their instrument. Many people there play one instrument fairly well

but want to pick up something else. For many of the instruments they offer three levels- beginning, intermediate and advanced. I remember the first year I went up there I wondered what level I would be in. To me advanced meant the teachers, not me, but you have to interpret those in the context of a matures. So advanced means you have been playing for a few years, intermediate, a year or so, and beginners can be relatively new, and it can be remarkable how much they learn in a week.



Molly Tuttle & John Reischman on the main stage

Tim B: What's it like to share the campsite with your instructors?

One thing I've noticed up there is you have stellar musicians, and you have stellar instructors, and sometimes, but not always, they are one and the same. The people who are amiable and can zero in on the problems a student is having on the instrument in class. But then there is also the instructors who are great in class, and then they go off and you never see them, hanging out jamming at night, or in the day time just wandering around. Then you have instructors like the players in the Scroggins band; they're just fabulous musicians, but they just hang out with the people all the time. You'll go out and jam at night and there will be one or two band members in the circle. That just seems to be how they spend their off time, just as the students would, hanging out with other people playing music. For other musicians the draw may be that they want to be at a place where they can hang out with their peers, the other instructors. They want to be off working on the business of playing music, or playing music together. After months on the road they finally get to be with other musicians they like, so for them it's like a conference, so good for them. Then there are the ones who just want to hang out, so better for us.

TB: Let's talk about fiddle for a bit. How important do you think it is for a bluegrass band to have a fiddle player?

TH: I think it's important but in a way that can often be duplicated by dobro, as it's the one lyric instrument, as it can play a melodic line with a sustained note, much like the human voice. None of the other guys can; they're all plunka, plunka, plunka, chunka, chunka, chunka. The fiddle can provide the lyric fill in the song, those long slides. Of course fiddles can take fast percussive breaks too, but so can mandolins. To an extent we are all trying to duplicate the human voice in music, as that seems to be where it all comes from, except for all the percussive stuff.

TB: Is there any advice you can give to people starting out in old tyme ore bluegrass music playing fiddle?

TH: I'll characterize my advice by what I want to get out of a class when I go up there, I don't want to go up and have somebody teach me a tune, or three tunes, I want technique. I can learn a tune on my own. I can listen to it on YouTube and imitate it and get the notes. But I want a teacher who has so much more experience that they can point out if, lets say, you were doing a really weird thing with your bow, and it's sliding around while you're drawing it and the tone isn't ever going to be right, or the way you're holding the bow, you're gripping it so tightly you're never going to gave any control. They notice technical things, and they will pick a tune to work on that gives them the opportunity to focus on a number of new technical ideas that they want to focus on. I'd say pay attention. Years ago a friend went up and signed up for beginner fiddle class. She came from her first class, and I met her that day and said, how did it go? She said, oh God, I've got to switch to the intermediate class, beginners was way too low for me. We spent half an hour learning how to hold the bow. I kind of smiled because I was in the advanced bluegrass class and we'd spent the entire class talking about holding the bow, looking at the nuances, and that's what I want, and I say pay attention to that. The tunes you will learn elsewhere,





## The Slokan Ramblers Represent at Vancouver Folk Festival 2017

The Toronto based Slokan Ramblers are one of the busiest bluegrass bands in Canada these days. If you've ever wondered if it was possible to support yourself as a full time bluegrass musician, this super tight foursome is living proof that it can be done. They hit the road for four months of the year and are coming our way in the spring, to perform at the Anza. I caught up with them at the Vancouver Folk music festival in July, and I've got to say these boys cover all the bases- strong arrangements, powerful vocals, a big sound, and they are all dynamite soloists. I had a quick chat with the guys after their concert on Stage Two on Sunday:

BB: Right off the bat boys, where's the fiddle?

SR: We love playing with fiddle players but four is easier to tour with, four seats in the van, two hotel rooms.

BB: What's it like being young guys from the biggest city in Canada playing traditional southern mountain music?

SR: It's a misconception to think there is little bluegrass in Toronto, as it's actually a vibrant scene. You can see bluegrass and old tyme shows pretty well seven nights of the week. There are lots of great young bands and lots to get us inspired with. Most of the guys from the band met at jazz school, and we would go to the weekly jam at the Silver Dollar, every Wednesday for twenty years it happened, and it was a big night in Toronto, three dollars cover, and it was a great time. We were drawn in by the music and the community that built up around it and here we are.

BB: We are living in times of rapid social change and technological advancement. How do you, as a band, navigate this hyper-modern world, while staying true to such traditional music?

SR: First off we pick songs and lyrics that resonate with us. We are not political, and if anything, the music is escapist. We like to entertain people, have a good time, and, if anything, the feeling is kind of visceral. There is also a history of progression in bluegrass, guys like John Hartford, and the people we meet at festivals and on the road, are, for the most part, really open minded.

BB: In all your travels do you guys have a favourite bluegrass town or city?

SR: I had a great time playing in Colorado at Rockyfest. Some of the best players around, and everybody is so humble, and they just treat you well. Also BC and Alberta are always lots of fun to tour through.

BB: Where do you guys draw the line between technical virtuosity and inspiration and spontaneous creativity?

SR: It's hard because bluegrass is kind of showy music, but you never want to let the technical side of the music overpower the emotion of the song, or the overall feel of the band. On the other hand a big, fast guitar solo is an important part of the sound and feel of the band, it just has to serve the purpose of the song its in. There are other songs, like Pastures of Plenty (a standout on their new Coffee Creek CD, written by Woody Guthrie), where there are no solos. We spend a lot of time arranging our music, trying different combinations, recording versions and playing them back until we are happy with every thing. And out of the arrangement and listening back comes the ideas around whether solos are needed or just sticking to the melody.

BB: You guys come across as such a tight band, so the effort you have put into arrangements is really evident. You come across as four people who are really playing together

SR: I remember watching a Beatles documentary and Ringo is sick for part of the gigs and so they play some of the shows with a different drummer, who's great, but he doesn't sound anything like The Beatles. And I've heard people comment on Ringo's drumming, both plus and minus, but he's amazing and when he doesn't play in the band they don't sound like the band. I like playing in a band that sounds a certain way together, that plays tight arrangements, and breathes the same air plays for each other and plays together.



The Slocan Ramblers Released Coffee Creek in 2015

