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# Is Bluegrass Going...gasp!...Mainstream? by James Reams

**It's getting so I can't turn on the TV or radio without hearing bluegrass music, or at least a banjo, within a few minutes!** I've even seen traditional bluegrass music used for a political ad campaign, which probably had Bill Monroe turning over in his grave! To paraphrase a car insurance commercial, all this bluegrass popularity makes me happier than a bluegrass musician with a record deal! And it's not just the US that has been bitten by the bluegrass bug. I just saw an ad for a foreign film that's taking the European film festivals by storm – and it's about a bluegrass musician! Plus crossover bands like the UK's mega-popular Mumford & Sons have helped sprinkle bluegrass seeds internationally.

That got me to thinking (a dangerous thing for most musicians), "Why this apparently sudden popularity for all things bluegrass?" And, "Is anybody else wondering the same thing?"

Bluegrass has been enjoying increased interest by the general public pretty much since the epic "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack took home three Grammys and went octo-platinum. What was it about that album, and bluegrass music in particular, that struck listeners, causing them to shell out their hard-earned cash and, for some, to pick up an instrument and start playing bluegrass? So, to take a cue from a popular late night talk show host, here's my stab at the top 10 reasons (in no particular order) why bluegrass has taken off in popularity. I'm anxious to hear what you have to say as well, so email me at [james@jamesreams.com](mailto:james@jamesreams.com) and give me your 2¢ worth.

1. **It's real.** Bluegrass is not your fast food music, it's got that "baked from scratch" authenticity. No fancy reverb action, no remixing, no eardrum blasting, mind numbing licks or lyrics...it's comfort food for the soul. In an age when most of us have traded in our dining room tables for desks (or worse yet, car seats), bluegrass music sort of tantalizes us and draws us in for a hearty "sit down" meal with family and friends.

2. **It's lasting.** Chasing 75 years and still going strong, bluegrass has sunk its' roots deep in Americana soil and it's not going anywhere. With its' solid foundation of traditional tunes, the sky's no longer limited to just "blue" either. Innovative bands have used bluegrass basics to open up whole new markets.

3. **It's in our blood.** Now that it's trendy to do ancestry searches, many Americans are discovering that bluegrass music runs in their veins. It takes them back to dogtrot cabins and memories of grandpap and friends picking on the front porch. Hey, nostalgia sells!

4. **It's inexpensive.** You don't have to have a wad of dough to buy an instrument. Heck, the first banjo was just a gourd, a stick and some string. Many an underprivileged youngster got their introduction to music by playing a washtub bass or a "canjo," that can be made for less than a cup of coffee at Starbucks.

5. **It's the work ethic.** Bluegrass songs relate the struggles of making a living. Coal miners, farmers, and truck drivers are just some of the "common folk" in our music. By association, bluegrass is seen as music for the working class, those unafraid of getting their hands dirty and putting in a hard



## It's a Wrap!

2013's 20th Anniversary Celebration was a huge success thanks to all of you. Without the support of festival promoters, press, associations and most of all bluegrass followers across the country, it just wouldn't have been possible. This year's Jamboree (featured in the [Fall Newsletter](#)) put a great cap on the celebration back east and the final stop here in the southwest wrapped everything up in style.

As the Grand Finale to the James Reams & The Barnstormers' 20th anniversary coast-to-coast celebration tour, the band performed to a packed house at the Fiddler's Dream concert hall in Phoenix, AZ. The standing room only event brought together this nationally-known bluegrass band, a Grammy-nominated fiddler, a 70-year-old music teacher, and an 11-year-old Hispanic guitar player for an evening of great music and good times. [Click here](#) to take a listen!

Since James moved to the Phoenix area 3 years ago, he's been looking for a way to give back to the bluegrass

community in the Southwest. Over 14 years ago, he established the Brown Jug Award which honors people in the Northeast whose impact on bluegrass music deserves recognition but have been overlooked by national organizations as their impact may have been regional in nature. Past recipients have included Peter Stampfel of the Holy Modal Rounders and this year Carol Beaugard, host of the syndicated Lonesome Pine RFD radio show.

So to top off his 20th anniversary celebration, James decided to give out a Barnstormer Boost Award to honor someone in the Southwest. And the first recipient is...Anni Beach, founder of the [Jam Pak Blues 'N' Grass Neighborhood Band!](#) The original band started when 2 little second graders knocked on her door after she had just finished substitute teaching at their school. They wanted her to sing and play more music with them. In her words, "That was in April, 1994 and life at the Beach House was never the same again!" Now at 25 members ranging in ages from 5 to 90, this ethnically diverse neighborhood band performs at bluegrass festivals and events across Arizona every year.

A featured performer at the concert Saturday night was one of Anni's students, 11 year old Alan. Alan was

day's work. That's the work ethic that made America — we're proud of it, and rightly so.

6. **It's the banjo.** Long associated with Americana, folk, and roots music, the banjo is now twanging it up in just about every musical genre: jazz, hardcore punk, classical, rock & roll, contemporary Christian, post-bop (or blu-bop), fusion, experimental new age, gospel, and, of course, country. Some critics hail the recent innovations in amplifying the banjo as the reason for its' surge in popularity. Whatever the reason, the banjo is no longer taking a backseat to the electric guitar which ousted it from popular music back in the 1930s.
7. **It's the Internet.** What bluegrass pioneer would have believed that by 2013 80% of the households in America would have at least one gizmo that connects to the Internet? Okay, well their first comment would probably have been "What's the Internet?", but you get my point. And that leads into my next three reasons which wouldn't have been possible without the Internet.
8. **It's YouTube.** Used to be that music teachers were as hard to find as a four leaf clover in the desert, especially for bluegrass instruments like the banjo, mandolin and dobro. But now, thanks to the popularity of YouTube, students of these instruments can learn to play in their own homes, on their own time schedules, and at their own pace. And that's music to a future musician's ears!
9. **It's social media.** Everyone is so connected these days. Email, e-zines, Facebook, online groups, Twitter, etc. have made it possible to get the word out to all parts of the world about bluegrass music in general, news items, festivals, concerts, and more. Nowadays, even grandpaps and grandmas that live over the river and through the woods have emails addresses and Facebook pages — if they don't then they have grandkids that bring their iPads, laptops, iPhones, and glitzy gizmo-Googleing gadgets galore when they visit! (Did you get my 5G reference? It was a struggle.)
10. **It's online sales.** Wow! I can't think of anything that has made it easier for a musician to get their music into the hands of listeners across the world than the advent of online sales. And now, with the option to download individual songs/tunes as well as purchase the entire album, there are even more opportunities for bluegrass to be heard any time and anywhere.

You tell me, am I just more sensitive to bluegrass' presence in the media because I'm a musician? Or have any of you noticed that it seems to be everywhere you turn lately? How do you feel about bluegrass going mainstream?

**Side Note:** This article by James Reams originally appeared on the California Bluegrass Association's webzine on December 19, 2013. Ø



## Kick Off the New Year Right!

**James Reams & The Barnstormers** will be appearing at the [Blythe Bluegrass Festival](#) in Blythe, CA on January 17 & 18 and at the [Agri-Country Bluegrass Festival](#) in Casa Grande, AZ on Saturday, January 25th. Both of these festivals are located in the sunny Southwest, so shake off the cold and head on over.

What's better than a



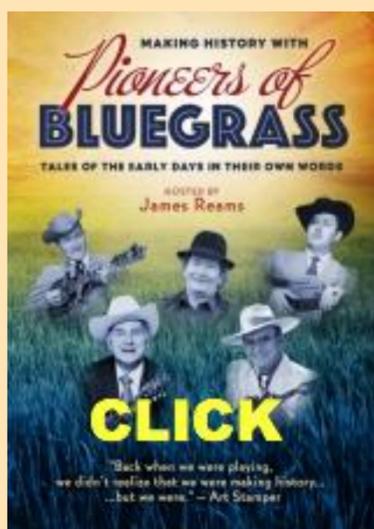
## A Piece of the Action

In going through the bits and pieces of film that didn't make it into the DVD documentary, "[Making Hlstory with Pioneers of Bluegrass](#)," we came across this wonderful clip of legendary mandolinist, Frank Wakefield. James had the pleasure of talking with Frank about his career and was sure surprised when Frank handed him a guitar and asked him to play along

only 7 when he followed his older brother to Anni's house. He picked up the guitar and has been playing and singing ever since. Now he performs in 3 bands, teaches guitar playing, and, according to Anni, "is a delight!" He brought down the house when he performed his masterful renditions of "Two Dollar Bill" and "Clinch Mountain Backstep" with James Reams & The Barnstormers. Lookout Sleepy Man Banjo Boys!

Anni commented, "Our goal for Jam Pak has always been to make ourselves and others happy with our music." And that should be the goal of any musician! After 20 years as a bandleader, James

Reams is so proud to be a part of bluegrass today and, with your support, he hopes to continue to make himself and others happy with his music. Thank you for a great year! ∅



## Bluegrass on Broadway

James Reams' recently released DVD documentary "Making History with Pioneers of Bluegrass: Tales of the Early Days in Their Own Words" has been selected for the [Bluegrass on Broadway Film Festival](#). The screening is scheduled for Sunday, January 26, 2014 at Noon in beautiful Redwood City, CA.

James will be on hand to answer questions, tell the back stories and talk about what it was like to put this "labor of love" together. If you're in the area, be sure to catch this FREE event. It runs the whole weekend and features live performances as well.

If you haven't already gotten your copy of the DVD, then what are you waiting for? [Click HERE](#) and order your copy today! ∅

bluegrass festival to get your new year started off right! Make your New Year's Resolution one that gets you outdoors, enjoying music and supporting the bluegrass community...a bluegrass festival is just what the doctor ordered! ∅



## Soon To Be Released DC/Baltimore Banjo Project

Walter Hensley, fondly known as the Banjo Baron of Baltimore, will have a cut on the upcoming album from Patuxent Music honoring legendary banjo players from the Washington DC and Baltimore area. "Upper Elk Creek" was written by Walt and performed with James Reams on the IBMA nominated album "[James Reams, Walter Hensley and The Barons of Bluegrass](#)" released in 2002.

Born in Grundy, VA, Walt moved as a boy to his grandparents' house in nearby Upper Elk Creek. He romped and played in the hills and hollers there. His grandfather raised hogs

on "Bluegrass Stomp."

Frank cuts loose and pretty much gives the viewer a clinic on mandolin pickin' at its finest toward the end of the video. It's a real pleasure to watch this master having fun doing what he loves to do. ∅



## Ambassador of Bluegrass

For years, James Reams has been called an "Ambassador of Bluegrass" for his dedication to promoting the music he loves throughout the nation and the world. Not only has he been the bandleader of a nationally-known band for 20 years, he also coordinates a well-attended festival, has written numerous songs, is a reluctant film producer, and now has the honor of serving on the Board of Directors for the [Arizona Bluegrass Association](#).

This is a particularly good fit for James. The ABA sponsors the "[FutureGrass](#)" program to increase awareness of bluegrass music in Arizona. This program is designed to encourage children and adults to play bluegrass and acoustic instruments. ABA FutureGrass works closely with Anni Beach and the [Jam Pak Blues 'N' Grass Neighborhood Band](#) to teach people how to play bluegrass music through workshops and opportunities



## Upcoming Events

For booking, contact  
[james@jamesreams.com](mailto:james@jamesreams.com)

January 17-18

[Blythe Bluegrass Festival](#)

Blythe, CA

January 25

[Agri-Country Bluegrass Festival](#)

Casa Grande, AZ

January 26

[Bluegrass on Broadway Film Festival](#)

Redwood City, CA

April 6

[Old Stone House](#)

Brooklyn, NY

April 12-13

[Marana Bluegrass Concert](#)

Marana, AZ

June 15

[Wind Gap Bluegrass Festival](#)

Wind Gap, PA

June 20

[Jalopy's](#)

Brooklyn, NY

June 21

[Smoked Country Jam](#)

Avis, PA

For info on additional  
appearances,  
[visit our website.](#)



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and had peach, plum and apple trees. "I felt it must have been like the Garden of Eden," says Walt. When they went into town, the only thing they would have to buy was coffee or flour. Then the mining companies moved in. This song captures Walt's love of the area, it was his way of paying tribute to what once was. ø



## JOIN the AZ Bluegrass-Oldtime Digest

Click [HERE](#) to join this Yahoo Group. Still in it's first year, the AZ Bluegrass-Oldtime Digest is catching on as a meeting place for people involved in or fans of bluegrass and old-time music in and around Arizona to discuss the music we love. Tell all your Arizona friends about us!



## JOIN the NY Bluegrass-Oldtime Digest

Click [HERE](#) to join this Yahoo Group. The NY Bluegrass-Oldtime Digest provides a forum for bluegrass fans and those involved in bluegrass located in the north east to share information about the music we love and catch

to "jam" with others in the program.

As a former schoolteacher, James relates to helping young and old (and all stages in between) to pick up and learn the instrument(s) of their choice and not be afraid of that new experience. He is excited about this opportunity to serve the bluegrass community in Arizona and is looking forward to the many new friendships this term on the Board will bring. ø



## Check Out the [CBA](#) Webzine!

James has been asked to contribute to the "[Welcome](#)" column on the Home Page for the California Bluegrass Association. His articles appear on the 3rd Thursday of each month. James brings a unique perspective to the popular CBA webzine as he is the only bandleader that provides an article.

[Check it out](#) and let James know your suggestions for future articles or comments on past stories by sending him an email at [james@jamesreams.com](mailto:james@jamesreams.com). ø

up on the latest news.

- [Southwest Bluegrass Association](#)
- [California Bluegrass Association](#)
- [Bluegrass Music Society of the Central Coast](#)
- [Bluegrass Association of Southern California](#)
- [San Diego Bluegrass Association](#)
- [San Diego and North County Bluegrass and Folk Club](#)
- [San Diego Folk Heritage](#)
- [Colorado Bluegrass Music Society](#)
- [Southern Nevada Music Society](#)
- [Central Texas Bluegrass Association](#)
- [Far West Folk Alliance](#)
- [International Bluegrass Music Association](#)

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