



Chuck Poling

## Bluegrass Confidential By Chuck Poling

### Belle Monroe's 'Long Lonesome Day' a tribute to Rick Hendricks

Though the emergence of iTunes has changed the face of how we collect and listen to music, most bands – bluegrass and otherwise – still feel the need to record a CD. There's something about the physical thing that gives band members a sense of accomplishment. For a band that gigs a lot, it's nice to have a CD to sell. Making a CD is easier than ever from a technical standpoint, but creating a quality product that captures the essence of a band requires a lot of preparation, a good deal of give and take, and a dash of spontaneity.

Long Lonesome Day, released in April by Belle Monroe and Her Brewglass Boys, is a great example of how these variables can align and result in an album that is both entertaining and thought provoking. The San Francisco sextet has been performing for a decade in the Bay Area and beyond, including appearances at Wintergrass, Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, and the CBA's Father's Day Festival. A few years back, they placed third in the prestigious Rockygrass band competition.

The band is notable for maintaining a steady lineup over the years. Pam Brandon aka Belle Monroe (guitar), Jordan Klein (banjo), Diana Greenberg (fiddle), Ted Silverman (mandolin), and Tom Drohan (bass) were joined for many years by the late Rick Hendricks on dobro. After Rick passed away in December of 2009, he was replaced by Will Fourt.

The new CD is a tribute to Rick who wrote the title track and left a legacy of musical playfulness.

"We only performed the title track 'Long Lonesome Day' with Rick a handful of times while he was alive," recalled Jordan. "However, I remember clearly that he used to sing the heck out of that song, with an amazing amount of soul behind his voice. I am honored to have had the opportunity to record that song, and I hope we've done it justice."

The cut also includes a novelty that Rick would have appreciated. It features "the only trombone solo in bluegrass, no



Belle Monroe and Her Brewglass Boys

doubt," quipped Belle, performed by Rick's friend Kevin Johnson.

Belle and the Boys co-produced the album with Ben Bernstein at Spliggety Fidge Studios, where Ben also served as studio engineer. His familiarity with the band's music (he's subbed on bass for them before) helped him establish a level of trust and confidence with the musicians. Michael Romanowski mastered the

final product and also provided encouragement throughout the process.

"We discussed recording with a lot of people. It was Michael Romanowski who really drilled into us the idea of being super-prepared for the recording sessions. We have him to thank for it because it paid off," said Tom. "Professionally, Ben Bernstein is a great guy to work with – a huge

asset to have with you in the studio."

A previous CD, released in 2007, was recorded live. While it did a great job of capturing the excitement and energy of the band, it did little to prepare them for the full-blown studio experience.

Diana recommends that anyone going into the studio should prepare by recording themselves in rehearsal and listening critically to the results. "It's shocking how different things may sound to you when you listen back to them as opposed to while you're playing them, and it's very likely to spur changes in what you want to play," she advised. "Much better to have that happen in advance of the tape rolling and the clock ticking."

Inevitably there's a tradeoff between the energy and spontaneity of a live recording and the structure and precision of a studio take. Said Belle, "Playing for people creates a feedback loop that hopefully generates a great performance. Capturing that magic is very hard to do in a tracked stu-

dio situation. Sometimes magic is chosen over perfect tempo. In rare occasions you get both."

Tom jokes that their previous recording experience must not have made much of an impression on the band. "We learned to not bother making a CD, but we forgot the lesson, so we made another."

The band performs as a tight, cohesive unit, despite their each bringing a wide variety of influences to the picture. The first step toward making the album was selecting the material. Each song provides insight to the many threads that make up the Brewglass sound.

"The choice of the covers certainly reflects the taste of the band member who brought the song to the band," said Belle. "For instance, I brought 'One After 909' and 'The Big Light,' both of which give a good idea of who I've been listening to in the rock world. I also brought Julie and Buddy Miller's 'Midnight & Lonesome.'"

*Continued on A-19*

## The Allan French Column by Allan French

### Nearby Lived a Miner Forty-Niner

There are many neat things to see and do while you're visiting Grass Valley for the Music Camp or the Father's Day Festival. You can learn about NINE possibilities at [www.GrassValleyChamber.Com/](http://www.GrassValleyChamber.Com/) (Navigate to "Visitors & Conventions > Sites and Museums.") You can also ask an experienced festival-goer what are their favorite side activities.

I would recommend visiting the city of North Bloomfield (home of Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park), northeast of Nevada City. This is almost like a ghost town but doesn't have the eerie feeling of one. The town's only residents are the California Park Rangers that give tours and provide security. This was a boomtown during the era of hydraulic mining of 1850-1890. For kids fascinated with oversized SuperSoaker guns, they may get a kick out of the 15-foot water cannons. A half-mile from the "heart of the city" is a one-room schoolhouse and a church. North Bloomfield reminds me of the "Little House on the Prairie" set – it is very authentic (unlike the "old town" districts in some Old West towns). Guided tours are led **\*\*once\*\*** daily at 1:30pm; and I certainly found it worth attending.

A word of caution: Plot a route that minimizes your travel on North Bloomfield Road if possible. It is unpaved and is best suited to 4WD vehicles. Taking "the long route" may involve more miles but

a faster speed. Bring your own food and water with you, as the on-site concessions are meager. While there last year, I picked up the CD, "The Miner's Dream: Songs of the California Gold Rush." Soon after listening to it, I decided to add "Clementine" to my banjo repertoire.

The Empire Mine park and the North Star Mine exhibit are both very close by to the Nevada County Fairgrounds. (They are on East Empire St and Allison Ranch Rd, respectively.) Within a few years, if the state's Parks Department budget allows it, visitors should be able to go underground into a mine-shaft at The Empire Mine. You can see the Anderson Family Bluegrass Band performing at "The Miners' Picnic" in a photo at the website [www.EmpireMine.Org/](http://www.EmpireMine.Org/).

### I Found the "Lost And Found"

Along with my own tips, last month I shared a summary of tips from Melinda Faubel, regarding how to not lose your stuff at a music festival. For those who enjoy reading advice columns, or are friends of Melinda, check out [www.BootsAndSaddles4Mel.Blogspot.Com/](http://www.BootsAndSaddles4Mel.Blogspot.Com/); then navigate to June 2010 in the archives section and read "What-I-Learned In The CBA Booth." If you're at FDF while reading this, it's not too late to grab business cards and a Sharpie pen and start "tagging" everything that you brought with you! Speaking of finding things: While at

upcoming festivals and jams, if you find any music related personalized license plates" (or perhaps a clever bumper sticker), feel free to pass on the specifics to me at [AFrench123\[at\]comcast\[dot\]net](mailto:AFrench123[at]comcast[dot]net). If I didn't cite it already in a column last year, let me know and I'll add it to the "best of" segment that I'm planning for August or September.

### Family Fun and Fiddle Prodding

Virtually all kids like music, whether they are preschoolers or twenty-somethings, though their tastes may differ MIGHTILY from your own. A bluegrass festival is a safe place to let them grow as musicians and as people. While at FDF, see Frank Solivan / Regina Bartlett / Sharon Elliott to learn about the "Kids On Bluegrass" program. See Bruce Long to learn about the "Lending Library." (A free instrument your kid can borrow long-term – what could be better?) Contact info for these people (and many others) appears in the front of this newspaper. Why do I so often mention the events and programs aimed at kids? Maybe because I'm a bit jealous of them. I would have been THRILLED to participate in such activities when I was their age. (At least, that's what the **\*\*adult\*\*** me thinks.)

Do you know a youngster that needs prodding? My former neighbor's young daughter plays violin at school. (These neighbors have been FDF attendees for many years; they enjoy the music but none of them



Allan French

plays except the daughter.) Prior to last year's FDF, I urged her to join the "Kids On Bluegrass" program. When she showed up with a messed-up fiddle and used that as an excuse for not participating, I told her I'd find a luthier to fix it. Steve Joynes performed "fiddle first aid" by flashlight so that she'd have a working instrument for the next day. Once she finally met Frank Solivan and started interacting with the other kids, she enjoyed the experience. Jeanie Ramos is on a similar mission right now. She is acquainted with a teenaged violinist who recently quit studying classical music. She is supplying him with CDs and instructional DVDs (and her own guitar accompaniment), encouraging him to take up fiddling before his bowing skills deteriorate. Even if you're not a parent, it is still your responsibility to encourage the young people in your life. It will help ensure the future of roots music; and someone will likely be grateful that you encouraged them to pursue a fun activity.

# Bluegrass Band

- Cliff Compton



Cliff Compton

## Chasing the Dream

And David sat in the basement of that old church  
Playing "Deep River Blues" just like Doc Watson  
While the Sufi Dancers Whirled around upstairs  
Rattling the wooden floors and messin' with his  
timing.

And Mike slept in most every morning  
Until his street tough cat Brutus

Would smack him in the face to wake him up  
Then he'd plug his electric into his Marshall and  
play Led Zeppelin

Until the Gypsies upstairs banged on the floor to  
quiet him down

And Ray did stuff with a fiddle that no one really  
had a right to do

Living in the back of his truck with a mattress, a  
loaf of bread and

Some peanut butter

Talking to himself and wearing a dozen different  
hats

And me,

I just played my twelve string like Richie Havens,  
listened to the Nitty Gritty Dirt band playing "Will  
the Circle Be Unbroken" with Maybelle Carter

And dreamed of being Bob Dylan

And if we'd have had twenty dollars between the  
four of us, it would have been alright

And we were playing for ten dollars a night and  
beer

And we'd strong arm the tip jar, passing it after  
every set.

Maybe get another five bucks a piece

And I remember sitting in that greasy spoon off of  
Burnside Street in Portland, Oregon

Where they sold a hamburger that would cover a  
dinner plate for about a buck fifty

And the four of us pooled our resources and split  
that hamburger four ways

Enjoying the afterglow

From the crowd last night

When everything was perfect

And everything was right

And we were happy as it gets

All four of us

Flat broke

Near starving'

Chasing the dream

## Joe Weed's Studio Insider

*Note: I'll be giving my "Recording Bluegrass Instruments" workshop at the Grass Valley Father's Day Festival on Saturday, June 18 at 12:50 (lunch break), and showing my film "The Waltz to Westphalia" on Friday evening at 6:10 (dinner break). Both events will be in the room behind the Luthiers' Pavilion, next to the food court.*

*Be sure and check out the John Hartford String Band, playing Thursday at 12:00 noon and 9:40 PM, and Friday at 9:10 PM, closing out the Thursday and Friday night main stage entertainment. The band features fiddler Matt Combs, one of Nashville's best, and veteran of the Grand Ole Opry and most Nashville bluegrass venues. Matt was the principal fiddler and my co-producer on "Pa's Fiddle," a CD collection of 19th century American music played by Laura Ingalls Wilder's father Charles. "Pa" Ingalls was a fiddler, and in her "Little House" books, Laura documents his playing throughout.*

### Who invited Murphy to the Studio?

I'm running a little slowly today. Yesterday's session began at 10:00 AM. PGE thought that 9:00 AM would be a good time to shut off the electricity to entire area. As the drummer rolled up in his truck full of drums, my assistant engineer doubled over with acute food poisoning and had to leave. He drove out of the parking lot, barely missing the arriving singer-songwriter, who was coming to demo up four tunes. The bass player was right behind.

So no power, no water (we're on a well here) no light, no gofer, an entire drum kit to mic and sound-check, plus a bass rig and a line-of-sight set-up for the singer-songwriter, who was in a separate room but really wanted eye contact with the rhythm section as they tracked.

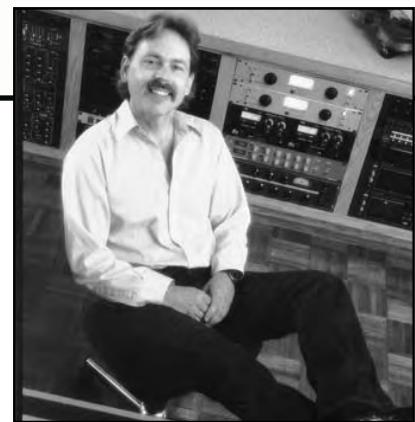
As part of the acoustic design of the studio, it has no windows to

the outside, so it was dark – really dark. I put the rug down for the drummer and then got out of his way and carried drum cases out and set up cabling for the bass player. While I was setting up the microphones for the drum kit, the power came on. The computer system came back up pretty well, except that ProTools couldn't find the attached authorization key and wouldn't launch. So I smiled and re-booted. Then I re-booted the computer. Finally ProTools was happy and let me get back to work.

"This is going to be a long day," I said quietly to myself as the producer arrived, unaware that we were in post-power failure mode.

I miked the drums in a fairly typical fashion for an acoustic pop-rock session. Each of the drums and the high hat gets its own microphone/preamp chain, and above the kit I placed a pair of adjustable – pattern condenser microphones in a stereo pair, pointing to opposite sides of the kit. For these mics, I used a fairly wide pick-up pattern to enhance the overall ambient sound of the drum kit. For the kick drum I placed one mic inside, close to the beater, and put another mic outside, about 10" from the front head. I like having the two different kick drum sounds when I'm mixing a session like this, so I can turn up one mic if I need more bottom end thrust, or turn up the other if I need more of the "tap" of the beater against the head. I used condenser mics for everything except the snare and kick drums.

Earlier in the week, I had prepared a ProTools template for this session, labeling all the channels with the appropriate instrument, microphone and preamp names. So as I raced to get the session underway without the help of a second engineer, I glanced at the computer monitor periodically to see what microphone, patch point, and ProTools input to use. The gods and



Joe Weed

goddess were with me, and the miking, patching and routing went quickly. The bass player was playing electric, and carries his own custom preamplifier, so routing that into ProTools was fast and simple.

Then I turned my attention to the singer's guitar. I set up an xy pair of condenser mics in a spot where he could play and watch the drummer, and took a line from his guitar's built-in pick-up. Each of these signals went to a separate ProTools track, so when we're mixing we can adjust each one separately. I set up his vocal mic (a large diaphragm condenser set to a tight cardioid, or uni-directional pattern) so that he could both play and sing as the drums and bass went down.

When we finally carried the last drum cases out of the studio last night after 10:00 PM, I realized it had been a twelve-hour session. We all worked hard, and in spite of all the little gremlins that had tried to thwart the session, we had 4 tunes "in the can." But I really don't remember falling asleep last night...

*Joe Weed records acoustic music at his Highland Studios near Los Gatos, California. He has released six albums of his own, produced many projects for independent artists and labels, and does sound tracks for film, TV and museums. He recently worked on the PBS film "Andrew Jackson: Good, Evil, and the Presidency." Reach Joe by calling (408) 353-3353, by email at joe@highlandpublishing.com, or by visiting joeweet.com.*

## Bluegrass Confidential By Chuck Poling

From Page A-18

Added Ted, "Belle's 'Square Peg in the Round' has a close-to-autobiographical bent to it and is a true bluegrass song. My own 'Teardrops Turned to Snow' is just an attempt at writing a tragedy ballad in a minor key that tells an intriguing tale and has enough drama to make for interesting listening. Diana's 'Life of the Party' was an inspired novelty that reveals just a glimpse of her free spirit."

Once the song selection was agreed upon, arrangements had to be worked out – which required a bit of back and forth between in-

dividual members.

"It's very much a consensus sound: arrangements are done by group – which can take longer, but ultimately everyone is on board with the overall approach to a song," said Tom. "Different people contribute more than others at different points, but everyone gets a hearing when arrangement ideas are be batted around."

"We debate this stuff heavily, run through the options presented, and decide as a group what works best. Most of the time consensus works, but on occasion it takes persistence to either win the day or sway the debate,"

said Ted.

"We resolve our differences the hard way – by talking through them," said Jordan. "Collaborating with other musicians to craft a song is one of the reasons I love music, and I'm so glad to have the opportunity to work with the great musicians in this band."

Belle commented, "We have a rule that we at least give a good try to any song a band member brings for consideration before it's rejected out of hand. Once accepted, we start the group work of dissecting the song for hooks, arrangements, tempo, and vocal harmonies. This is where it gets tricky, and sometimes some-

one will feel very strongly about something but be outvoted by the majority decision."

However they managed to work it out, the results speak for themselves. Long Lonesome Day highlights the considerable range of musical styles and individual talents within the band. It's the perfect balance between the professional-level production values of a studio album and the fire and fun of a live recording.

The Brewglass sound is heavily influenced by rock, swing, and folk, and is heavily accented by hard-driving rhythm and tight harmonies. But on this album they also demonstrate the ability

to put over every type of song, from a rollicking version of Elvis Costello's "Big Light" to slower, mournful material like "Black Lace and Diamonds" (written by Belle's mother, Jean Brandon) and the title track.

Putting out the CD took months of intensive effort and considerable cost, but now that it's complete, Belle Monroe and Her Brewglass Boys can take great satisfaction in a job well done. Long Lonesome Day is the perfect showcase for the multi-talented sextet and, just as importantly for them, it's a fitting tribute to their fallen brother Rick Hendricks.