



DCBU

Newsletter of the D.C. Bluegrass Union Winter 2008

The D.C. Bluegrass Union Presents

*John Starling & Carolina Star
with
The Lisa Kay Band*

*Saturday January 19, 2008 at 7pm
James Lee Theater 2855-A Annandale Rd, Falls Church, Va, 22042*

*Tickets \$20, \$15 for DCBU members, seniors and kids
Reservations: derzon@verizon.net 703 916-0655*



Mando Master Akira Otsuka

(Second in a series profiling world-class bluegrass musicians in the Washington, D.C., area.)

Akira Otsuka's mastery of the mandolin is so complete he spends much of his time playing with his eyes gently closed. His musical journey from a small club in Japan to the biggest



American stages is nothing short of remarkable.

Akira grew up in the Japanese port city of Kobe in a musical family that listened regularly to Hank Williams and Elvis. American folk and country music were big on Japanese college campuses in the early 1960s, and Akira's older brother, Yutaka, caught the bluegrass bug early. In 1963, Yutaka handed his brother a

mandolin and said, "Hey, play this."

"Bluegrass interested me, it was neat," said Otsuka, who now lives in Gaithersburg, Md. So he began listening intently to the records American bluegrass greats Bill Monroe, The Stanley Brothers, Don Reno and the Country Gentlemen. By 1967, Akira joined with another brother, "Josh" Otsuka (guitar), Sab Watanabe (banjo), and Toshio Watanabe (bass), to form the group *Bluegrass 45*.

The band hung out at a local club in Kobe called Lost City and began playing regularly for U.S. military servicemen and European cruise-ship tourists. "We'd take flyers to the pier and invite people to Lost City, recalled Otsuka. The group soon grew to include Gakusei Ryo on fiddle and Eika Lee on guitar.

The young musicians benefited from the regular performances and quickly became practiced showmen. "One good thing we learned was how to entertain foreigners," said Otsuka. "Japanese people didn't know how to enjoy this music. Foreigners would get drunk and demand the song *Cigarettes, Whisky and Wild, Wild Women*. The club made money. We faked through – and got good at it."

Bluegrass 45 cut its first album, *Run Mountain*, in 1968. That was the same year Flatt & Scruggs toured Japan. It was the first real-life American bluegrass

band Otsuka had ever heard. "It was amazing," he recalled. The young Japanese bluegrassers were invited to a dinner party with Earl and Uncle Josh Graves. "We just sat there and watched them eat," Akira said. Neither he nor any of his compatriots spoke English.

The band knew plenty of bluegrass lyrics but had memorized many of them by rote. Some American phrases caused particular confusion. "We had no idea what 'fox hound' meant," Otsuka said. And "sycamore tree" was another mystery. "Thicker-more tree, what is *that*?" he recalled, laughing.

"Foreigners would get drunk and demand the song *Cigarettes, Whisky and Wild, Wild Women*. The club made money. We faked through – and got good at it."

In 1970, Rebel Records owner Dick Freeland visited Japan with his family. He came to Lost City, heard *Bluegrass 45* and invited the band to come tour in the U.S. The young band mates hit up their parents for the \$6,000 plane fare and performed their first show at the Bean Blossom festival in Indiana in June 1971.

The band was petrified playing of front of legends like Bill Monroe, Don Reno and Charlie Waller, but their debut was as success, as was the three-

month tour that followed. That summer, *Bluegrass 45* performed at festivals in Canada, Sperryville, Va., Camp Springs, N.C., on the Grand Old Opry and at the Red Fox in Bethesda, Md.

During that trip, Akira met and worked with his hero John Duffey. "We impressed him, we knew everything he'd recorded with the Gents," Otsuka said. Duffey produced one of two albums the band recorded that summer.

The group returned to the U.S. the following summer, with several new personnel. In 1973, Otsuka decided to move to America permanently. "I just wanted to try it out over here. I'm the baby of the family, and my other brothers could take care of my parents." The same day he stepped off the plane in Washington, Otsuka accepted a spot in Cliff Waldron's band, the *New Shades of Grass*.

In 1975, Akira joined the popular local band *Grass Menagerie* that included Clayton Hambrick, Jim Hall, Bob Williams, Gary Schaum and Chris Ditson. In 1980, he formed *Grazz Matazz* with Al and Patti Petteway. During the 1980s and 1990s Otsuka was also a regular sideman at The Birchmere club, appearing with *The Seldom Scene*, Mac Wiseman, Jonathan Edwards, Steve Goodman, Jethro Burns and Peter Rowan, among others.

Otsuka remains active in bluegrass music and is currently putting the finishing touches on a tribute album to John Duffey featuring such luminaries as John Starling, Sam Bush, Bela Fleck, John Cowan, Tom Gray, Steve Gulley and Don Rigsby. He plays Duffey's Gibson F12 mandolin and teaches the instrument regularly both at his home and at the Grey Fox and Gettysburg festivals.

--Randy Barrett

Washington Festival Fund

DCBU is actively seeking donations to help us produce the Washington Bluegrass Festival. We currently have \$5,000 in gifts, but will need about \$40,000 to launch the event. The sooner you can make your tax-deductible contribution, the sooner you'll be sitting in your lawn chair enjoying great music at a premier festival right here in Washington. All gifts are being set aside specifically for the festival fund! Please contact Randy Barrett 703-405-6230.

DCBU Bluegrass Camp!

Mark your calendars for the 2008 DCBU bluegrass camp at Common Ground on the Hill. The camp will run July 13-18 at McDaniel College in Westminster, Md. Classes in

banjo, mandolin, guitar, dobro, fiddle, bass and voice will be offered plus workshops on jamming, harmony and more. All ages are welcome. For more information and registration call 410-857-2771.

Spring Concert

DCBU will present David Parmley & Continental Divide along with The Good Deale Bluegrass Band, featuring Mike Auldridge on Saturday April 12, 2008 at the James Lee Theater in Falls Church, Va. For reservations call Regina Derzon at 703-916-0655 or via email at derzon@verizon.net.

You can renew your DCBU membership online at www.dcbu.org

DCBU BOARD

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BLUEGRASS CALENDAR

January 11, 2007 - Friday

New Mode Grass
Tiffany Tavern
1116 King Street, Alexandria, Va
9:00pm, Tickets: no cover charge

January 12, 2008 - Saturday

Seneca Rocks / Jay Armsworthy & Easter Tradition
Lucketts Community Center
Route 15N, Lucketts, VA
7:00PM, Tickets: \$13

Dan Paisley & The Southern Grass
Holy Cross Lutheran Church
1090 Sterling Road, Herndon, VA
Time: 7:30 PM, Tickets: \$12
Doors open at 6:30 PM for a 7:30 PM show.

Orrin Star
Mandolin Workshop
Cheverly, MD
Phone: 301-773-6149
Noon, Tickets: \$40

Orrin Star
Guitars of Pikesville
806 Reisterstown Rd 2nd Floor S6,
Pikesville, MD
Phone: 410-415-5400, email:
8:00, Tickets: \$12

Skystone Bluegrass Band
Tiffany Tavern
1116 King Street, Alexandria, Va
9:00pm, Tickets: no cover charge

January 18, 2008 - Friday

Highland, Heath & Holler
Music Center at Strathmore
5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda, MD
8:00 PM, Tickets: \$18-42
Celtic Music's Voyage to Appalachia

Chester River Runoff
Avalon Theatre
40 East Dover Street, Easton, MD
Phone: 410-822-7299,
Time: 8:00PM

The Pluckers
Tiffany Tavern
1116 King Street, Alexandria, Va
9:00pm, Tickets: no cover charge

January 19, 2008 - Saturday

DCBU WINTER CONCERT!
John Starling & Carolina Star
and The Lisa Kay Band
at James Lee Community
Center Theater, 2855-A An-
nandale Road, Falls Church,
Virginia 22042 Time: 7:00PM.
Tix: \$20/\$15
call 703-916-0655

Ralph Stanley & The Clinch Mt.
Boys at The Fairview Ruritan Club
Galax, VA
Time: 7:30PM, Tickets: \$20
Phone: (276) 238-0376

Cedar Run
The Clubhouse
9008 Mathis Ave., Manassas, VA
Phone: 703-331-0998
Time: 9:00pm, Tickets: \$5.00

Over Under Down Yonder
Tiffany Tavern
1116 King Street, Alexandria, Va
Time: 9:00pm, no cover charge

January 22, 2007 - Tuesday

Savage Bluegrass
Sam's Bar and Restaurant
US 1 South, Laurel, MD
Time: 7:00 PM
No Cover

January 25, 2008 - Friday

Annapolis Bluegrass Coalition
Hampstead Middle School
Hampstead , Md.
Time: 6:00-7:30 pm

Amanda Murphy & The Lost Indi-
ans Tiffany Tavern
1116 King Street, Alexandria, Va
Time: 9:00pm, no cover charge

January 26, 2008 - Saturday

The Virginia Ramblers / The Char-
lie Sizemore Band
Lucketts Community Center
Route 15N, Lucketts, VA
Time: 7:00PM, Tickets: \$13

Salem Bottom Boys / Carroll
County Ramblers
Arcadia Bluegrass Concert
16020 Carnival Ave (Arcadia Fire
Co. Activities Bldg), Upperco, MD
Time: 7:00-10:30, Tickets: \$10.00

More: www.dcbu.org/calendar.htm

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