

Chapter Two: Sometimes a Great Notion: The Beginning of IBMA (1985-1986)

By Art Menius

In October 1985, *Fire on the Mountain* to which I owe my career in roots music, filmed its final thirteen episodes. As I'll explain below, less than a month later, I became the part-time Executive Director of the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA). The next two years, I count among my most enjoyable and satisfying.

During organizational infancy, an administrator must personally be involved in every aspect of its operations. At the start of my thirties, fortunately, I had a focus and energy that I can no longer sustain long term. Until the membership numbers for both IBMA, and later Folk Alliance, surpassed maybe 750, I could maintain something of a relationship with each member. I knew almost everything that happened in the organization – who paid their dues, who didn't get their newsletter in the mail, who was changing bands. I made some lasting friends and met my future wife that way.

Despite the late year transition, 1985 had marked my peak, such as it was, as a freelance writer. I tried to make a living working with an expanding circle of receptive editors. *Bluegrass Unlimited* published eight of my pieces, including back-to-back cover articles in June (John Hartford) and July (Dry Branch Fire Squad). Vernell Hackett, the editor at *Country News*, a tabloid that then ranked as the second largest country music monthly, ran two features of mine in the March issue, then gave me a regular acoustic music column that commenced in the next number. "Another Country" ran through January 1987. I continued until early 1986 to contribute heavily to the *Chapel Hill News* and occasionally to its parent *News and Observer* in Raleigh. I probably still did some writing for the *Carolina Bluegrass Review*. With non-musical writing, my work with the Linear Group that ended with *Fire on the Mountain*, some odd jobs like packing albums at Sugar Hill in Durham, and collecting rent from a novelist and fellow *News and Observer* free-lancer with more mainstream aspirations named John Welter, I patched together about one half the average household incomeⁱ. I was in the "gig economy" decades before that expression appeared. This typified, I think, the challenges of both free-lance and roots music work.

During the first weekend of January 1985, the Linear Group's live performance radio series "The Liberty Flyer" debuted on seventy-seven commercial country stations in thirty-three states potentially reaching 38,000,000 homes, according to a story I got placed in *Billboard* magazine.ⁱⁱ The work for the radio series meant that I would continue to spend most weekdays at the Linear Group office in Asheville, four hours from home, during one of the coldest winters in the region. The nadir came at sixteen degrees below zero. Given the erratic pay, I had to live in my office. My roles were contacting stations and

marketing the show to media in our markets. To promote the shows, I created the rosters of radio stations, print media, and organizations that I shifted to IBMA's use that fall. Even at its peak 113 stations, "The Liberty Flyer" could not land advertising revenue, perhaps because it did not engage an ad agent. Despite its artistic excellence, the series limped along for several months, too, supported by the last of The Linear Group's revenue from The Nashville Network.

The Linear Group believed that packaged with nostalgic "done-home neighborliness," bluegrass and related music could find a place in commercial radio. Also inspired by old-time radio shows, the one-hour "The Liberty Flyer" offered mostly live music with a little talk, unlike "A Prairie Home Companion," but without the musicological context of Nick Spitzer's "Folk Masters." Performances recorded live filled about fifteen minutes of each half of the weekly show, presenting artists including Bill Monroe, Chris Hillman with Bernie Leadon and Al Perkins, and Doc Watson. Each week, the show alternated five-minute segments by a pair of the finest people I have ever met, Gamble Rogers and John Hartford.

As the spring of 1985 approached, John's agent, Keith Case, and I convinced *Bluegrass Unlimited* to assign me to write a cover story about him. At the same time, the Linear Group wanted me to discuss some ideas with Hartford.

Not long after returning from Nashville to promote "The Liberty Flyer" at Country Radio Seminar, the convention of country format radio programmers, at the beginning of March, I headed back. In the Nashville suburb of Madison, I found my way to the Hartfords' home, which offered a commanding view of the Cumberland River. This was a more than appropriate home for a musician who wanted a big room for jamming, a riverboat man, collector of all things connected to the rivers of middle America or traditional music, writer of songs and prose, collector of fiddle tunes, and philosopher. In effect, the home contained the archival repository of man who kept everything. I enjoyed seeing John's face glow with enthusiasm as he told me about his then current collecting passions.

Over those two days in March 1985 we explored a lot of territory in both conversation and geography. The immersion in country music history Hartford provided exceeded my considerable expectations. Just standing in John's driveway, I witnessed the legendary record producer Cowboy Jack Clement, best known for his work with Johnny Cash, drop by to talk to John. Lunch at the Nashville's Elliston Place Soda Shop, which opened in 1939, involved a visit with one the Jordanares. A call from a formerly obese friend, who had lost an exceptional amount of weight by walking, prompted a drive to Murfreesboro to share the story with pre-eminent country music historian Dr. Charles Wolfe. He hoped this would inspire Charles to do the same, but he appeared to wonder what relevance the tale held and continued talking about early country music. Charles let each of us copy a recording of the Opry in December 1940.

Becky had, meanwhile, moved back to her hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, working at a Bread & Circus store in a nearby Weston. Whole Foods took inspiration from Bread & Circus eventually acquired it. She became active in the Boston Bluegrass Union, traveling to Cambridge to help with mailings, stuffing envelopes with future IBMA chairperson Stan Zdonik and mandolinist Richard Brown. BBU presented the first, and only outdoor, Joe Val Festival in 1985. “The biggest thrill was using my photo for the poster.” I met Val, a pioneering bluegrass mandolin player in New England, at my first *Fire on the Mountain* session. Although he had barely a year to live, Joe was most interested in hearing about cancer survivor Sam Bush’s health.

Presaging her DJ role in the 21st Century, Becky frequently made guest appearances on Boston area bluegrass radio programs, including the legendary “Hillbilly at Harvard” on WHRB-FM. Seeking out bluegrass DJs at events, she met George Hauenstein, whose hosted “Sunday Morning Country” on WZBC-FM at Boston College in Newton. “The format was half country, half bluegrass. I brought a ton of vinyl with me and we’d turn it into all bluegrass. For me it was a thrill because not long after I got there the phones would light up, five or six lines.”

Becky kept finding more ways to get involved in the music community. “I was knee deep in bluegrass and neck deep in backstage, mostly hospitality. I was often the person at the back-stage gate letting people in and out and finding people, such as hard to find artists like Peter Rowan. And I served a lot of meals.” She mostly did this at Winterhawk, then at Rothvoss Farm just west of where New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts meet, and at the frequent concerts produced by the Connecticut Friends of Bluegrass at the Chestnut Lodge in Colchester. “When I wasn’t backstage I was in front making pictures. The camera was almost part of my body. When I didn’t have it on me, people asked where it was.”



Figure 1 The long-time Winterhawk festival site at Rothvoss Farm. Photo by Becky Johnson.

By then I was two years into my work in bluegrass media and realized how much bluegrass needed an industry organization. We had talked about this at the Linear Group, and I'd mentioned it to a few folks and sketched out a few ideas. Allen Mills, veteran leader of Virginia's Lost & Found band, was vocal about the need for an industry event that he compared to the old DJ conventions which pre-dated the Country Music Association and the Country Radio Seminar. Grand Ole Opry star Sonny Osborne of the Osborne Brothers had, for several years, advocated for the creation of a bluegrass trust fund modeled on the Opry Trust Fund. He remained understandably bitter that the simply named Bluegrass Music Association in Honaker, Kentucky, had never gained traction. Several people, including Pete Kuykendall, my editor at *Bluegrass Unlimited* who had published "I'm So Glad" before the Cream had a hit with it, had, twenty years before, created *Bluegrass Unlimited* to be more an organization with industry-wide goals than the magazine it became. Not long thereafter, Carlton Haney tried to assemble a union of popular bluegrass musicians, but once formed it quickly imploded when artists did not like turning down work to follow their agreement. More recently the Nashville Bluegrass Music Association International (NBMAI) had sought to act as a trade group, and The Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America (SPBGMA) had networked a number of midwestern bluegrass clubs and fans and began presenting awards in Nashville. NBMAI would step aside in favor of IBMA, while SPBGMA settled into to be the fan-oriented group it remains. Hey Rube!, based in the upper Midwest, had been trying to unite acoustic musicians of all genre for mutual support, presenter contact information sharing, and group medical insurance. Desiring to advance "traditional performing arts as a trade," Hey Rube, a forerunner of

the American Federation of Musicians' Local 1000, was nearly moribund when IBMA was being formed, undone by musicians' lack of time and money, pushback against the "gig list," and alienation of the music business people, especially presenters, who support Hey Rube! needed.ⁱⁱⁱ

With all this combustible cotton dust in the air, someone merely needed to strike a match. Lance LeRoy, who emerged as the person with the guts to do it, had advanced from being Lester Flatt's bookkeeper to his agent. By 1985 he had a thriving small agency representing, among others, the Johnson Mountain Boys, the young traditionalists who were a top bluegrass act then. Lance arranged for June 15 and 16 the use of the sumptuous board room in Nashville's BMI headquarters, the same room that IBMA's Leadership Bluegrass program would start using in 2000. Three decades later, I still retain some of the complimentary BMI notebooks, ephemeral objects I made into keepsakes of an exciting time.

While some folks felt slighted that they were they not invited, I simply called Lance and quickly received an invitation. I rode to Nashville with Milton Harkey, then promoting one of the most popular family style bluegrass festivals in Denton, North Carolina. We stopped at a festival in east Tennessee Friday evening and enjoyed a typically hot set by Larry Sparks. Hearing someone that powerful, yet so underappreciated like almost all bluegrass musicians, gave both of us a lot to think about going into that first meeting.



Figure 2 Allen Mills of the Lost & Found by Becky Johnson

The two dozen participants I recall today included Lance, Allen, Sonny, Pete, Milton, and myself. First generation stars Jim & Jesse and Mac Wiseman came. Larry Jones from MBOTMA, the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association, represented associations, and Ray Hicks of Rolla, Missouri radio. John Hartin and Joe Carr, as I recall it, came up from South Plains College in the West Texas town of Levelland. They had pioneered bluegrass as part of college curriculum. Country Gentleman agent Len Holsclaw was there, along with Nashville agent Keith Case, who had the strongest talent lineup then and Doyle Lawson, whose band Quicksilver was the most popular that summer. Songwriter Randall Hylton represented NBMAI. Georgia festival promoter Norman Adams, and Ohio concert presenter Howard Epstein were those who hired musicians. Bill Monroe and his son James with their assistant Betty McNuff dropped by for a while and listened quietly. Bill suggested that SPBGMA needed to be “headed off at the pass.” Eventually James blurted out that they were interested whether this not-yet-extant organization would buy their Blue Grass Museum. The elder Monroe bought everybody lunch at the nearby Shoney’s, then they departed.

For a young man – the youngest in this august group – only a bit more than two years in the business just being at the table with so many leaders of the industry and the man credited with creating the genre made me feel validated in my work and excited about the opportunities these relationships could facilitate. That they seemed impressed by my contributions encouraged me to contribute more. Those couple of days elevated me from a prolific bluegrass writer and media worker to leadership status.

This was a long time ago. But I remember the potent mixture of energy, skepticism, commitment, distrust, and enthusiasm. Each person had their own vision of what the organization could or should become. We spent a lot of time sharing dreams and goals, arguing such pressing issues as whether to capitalize the ‘b’ in bluegrass, talking about the past, and somehow sliding toward consensus.

We agreed that we wanted to continue developing a bluegrass music trade association, although we could not decide on a name for it. We looked at the Country Music Association (CMA) as a model, charging Randall Hylton to obtain copies of its bylaws and investigate setting up a corporation in Tennessee. Electing a Steering Committee with Pete Kuykendall as its chair, we resolved to meet again on August 14-15 to discuss bylaws, elect an interim board of directors, and plan a public event for the fall.

Most important of all, we agreed not to define bluegrass. Along with “International” in the name, this simple step made all the difference, setting a path for IBMA that would succeed. We wanted to pull the field together. “What is bluegrass?” even today is the most divisive sentence in the bluegrass community. By sidestepping the whole matter, IBMA conveyed that it was different from its predecessors especially SPBGMA, which held its bands to more than strict definition. We signaled that IBMA would be an open tent, welcoming anyone who considered their music bluegrass. Eschewing artificial divisions was a

lightning bolt, even if it lacked a thunderclap. Thus, for the first full blown IBMA conference in 1987, Case and I would define eligibility to be showcased as artists appropriate for bluegrass events, rather than bluegrass artists. We shared a vision of the IBMA showcases offering our talent to presenters from outside the bluegrass field.

What inspired passion about a bluegrass business league in 1985? The foremost concern – the shared issue that annealed us - was survival, for many people in 1985 and as late as 1988, felt the bluegrass industry was on its last legs. Further, each of us had matters we believed that only an organization could address. Some issues remain—obtaining medical insurance for performers and dealing with two perceived problems with performance rights agencies, aggressive collections from festivals and venues and paltry payments to genre songwriters. A significant number of the desires one or more of us held, however, came to fruition directly or indirectly due to IBMA. *Bluegrass Unlimited* initiated airplay charts. Sonny Osborne argued passionately for a Bluegrass Trust Fund to assist musicians in time of need, and IBMA created one not long after its founding. After sending prolific music author and banjo player Dick Weissman to our 1987 trade show to assure that IBMA was a legitimate trade association, NARAS added a Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album. Our directors located a firm willing to underwrite group festival insurance. The organization created bluegrass awards starting in 1990. With the help of Owensboro and the Commonwealth of Kentucky, a bluegrass museum would open associated with IBMA, but like the Trust Fund, operating with its own board.

Keeping bluegrass alive as its own genre and community, nonetheless, was the primary driver of our enthusiasm for creating the association. No new bluegrass group had been signed to a major recording label since the 1970s. The number of festivals had declined since 1977 with a significant impact on performer income. The Stoneman Family, for example, had grossed \$114,000 in 1969, \$60,000 in 1977, and only \$32,000 in 1981. Nationally touring artists complained about regional bands taking gigs away. Over the past several years only Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, Hot Rize, and the Johnson Mountain Boys had emerged as exciting new major bluegrass stars. The best and brightest young musicians, such as Clinch Mountain Boy alumni Ricky Skaggs and Keith Whitley, had transitioned to country music to achieve economic rewards commensurate to their talent. Bluegrass radio seemed more and more marginalized to rural AM stations in the South and Midwest and non-commercial radio elsewhere. Major record chains interested in product sold per amount of shelf space, replaced the network of Mom & Pop stores that provided bluegrass in receptive markets, and the new world of compact disks replacing records loomed.

In early 1988, when the Johnson Mountain Boys announced their ultimately temporary retirement, The *Washington Post* depicted a genre lacking in youth. The article quoted me thusly:

"We have less youth involvement now," admits Art Menius, "and I'm afraid a lot of that is our own fault, because the bluegrass community has withdrawn into itself ... We don't always make new people feel welcome at our events. We haven't pushed out in the last 15 years to the degree that we should."^{iv}

Things were not so grim as Harrington's article portrayed. The nadir had passed for the bluegrass music industry not long, definitely not long enough for causality to be inferred, after IBMA began. I pointed out in my responses that more radio stations were playing bluegrass at some time each week than ever before, albeit much on smaller stations (if nothing else, *The Liberty Flyer* had proved a market existed on the commercial dial). Further, I cited the first *Public Participation in the Arts* study that the NEA had funded. Roughly one American in seven said they liked bluegrass music, but far less than one percent called it their favorite.^v

I accurately believed that the decline was a market correction. Part of the cause was the cyclical nature of roots music genre, as both Joe Wilson, who had revived the National Folk Festival and written what remains the text book for putting on a roots music festival, and Sugar Hill Records founder Barry Poss, pointed out in the article. Reliably a genre rises into the consciousness of mainstream music consumers, usually through a fluke hit record or a successful motion picture. Bluegrass would occupy that role for several years at the beginning of the 21st century, following the surprise hit movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. During the 1980s, Louisiana French, then Celtic and, at the end of the decade, blues enjoyed that attention. The chasm between liking and loving bluegrass in the data demonstrated why the cycle happens. In a real sense, people would visit bluegrass or blues for a while, then turn to another genre or entirely go back to pop or country.

The second factor was the vast shift in the bluegrass audience in the seats and campgrounds at festivals, that happened in a very short time after a shooting at the Berryville, Virginia festival. Bikers and hippies had replaced audiences from the Folk Revival as it splintered into various genre. Bikers, who had been a very significant portion of the audience during the early 1970s were no longer welcome, while hippies, another core audience of the time, were disappearing. The family-style, meaning no bikers drugs, or alcohol in the performance area, festivals were steadily building a new, older, more religious and politically conservative, and less southern audience, but such a radical change takes time. Festivals bounced back strongly in their new, sober wineskin during the second half of the 1980s.

Sugar Hill and Rounder, using modern packaging and promotion methods, were emerging as the bluegrass industry powerhouse labels, able to do business in a changing world. CD's would come to make classic and contemporary bluegrass more, not less, available. Eventually Alison Krauss, then the wunderkind fiddler of John Pennell's unsigned band soon to be called Union Station, would achieve

country stardom as a bluegrass artist. As soon as IBMA was on its feet, NARAS decided that bluegrass was ready for its own Grammy.

This was all yet to come in the summer of '85. Several of us, both skeptics and enthusiasts, threw ourselves into the bluegrass trade association project as July became August. Kuykendall and I drafted a press release about the June meeting stating that "...the purpose will be: 1) Promotion of the bluegrass music industry and unity within it. 2) Coordination of the industry's public image and recognition." Other than the creation of the trade association itself, the most radical act we made was to use the heretofore unused phrase "bluegrass music industry." Those three words, along with "international," bluntly defined the mission of IBMA. Perhaps somewhat aspirational, "bluegrass music industry" implied a whole rather than a bunch of loose pieces. It made it clear that we took ourselves seriously as a business and believed that building the commercial infrastructure was central to the survival and growth of the genre.

A lot of issues came into focus and many proposals prepared when we returned to the BMI building on August 13-14. By now we called the unofficial creators "the core group," as distinct from the elected Steering Committee and the soon-to-come temporary Board of Directors. According to the minutes, the 21 August participants consisted of Adams, Jones, Carr, Kuykendall, Case, LeRoy, Epstein, Lawson, Osborne, Hicks, Poss, Holsclaw, Hylton, Harkey, Mills, Hartin, innovative festival presenter Mary Tyler Doub, Mac Wiseman, who had experienced success in bluegrass and country, artist/agent Wayne Lewis, promoter Harry Grant, and me. ^{vi}

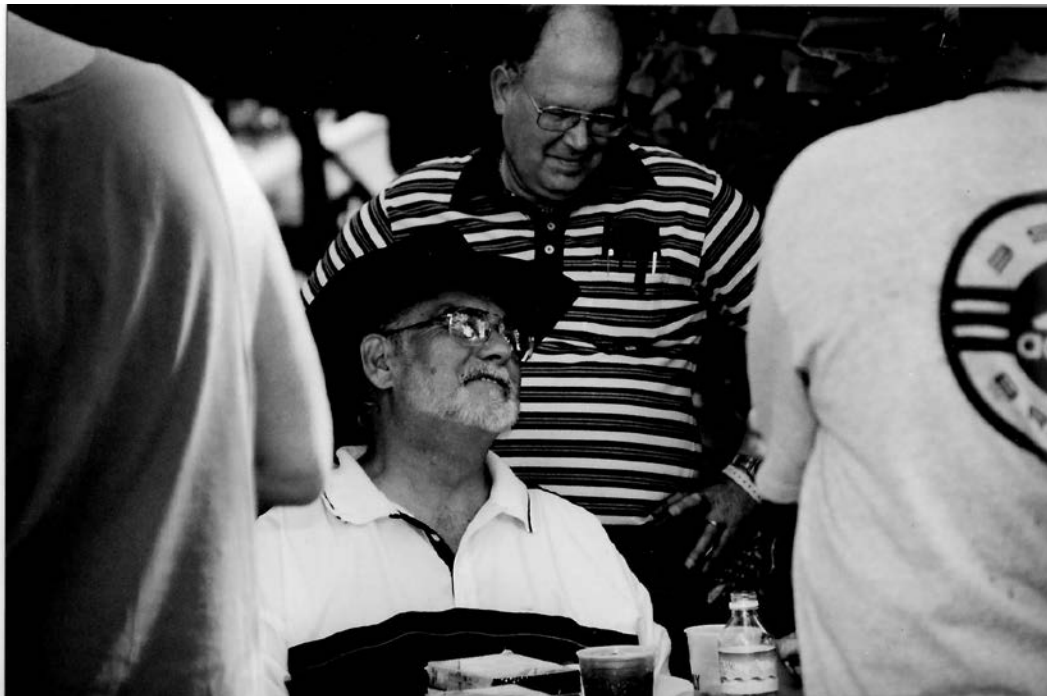


Figure 3 Sonny Osborne (seated) and Pete Kuykendall by Becky Johnson

By the time we adjourned on the evening of August 14, the idea of a bluegrass organization had a name: the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA). Now pronounced “I-B-M-A,” in the early days we said “IB-MA.” The core group selected that name from among nine candidates, all of which sound unnatural after more than three decades. They ranged from variants of IBMA such as “Worldwide Bluegrass Association,” to the xenophobic “American Bluegrass Music Association,” to the rather arrogant “American Music Association.”^{vii}

We hardly took “International” lightly. We asserted a “worldwide bluegrass music industry,” while welcoming bluegrass artists, labels, and promoters, largely from Canada, Europe, and Japan. Sab Watanabe, editor of Japan’s *Moonshiner* bluegrass magazine and member of the first Japanese band to appear at American festivals, later told me, “that word ‘international.’ That is what made us interested.”

We adopted the two points quoted above from the press release as our mission statement: “1) Promotion of the bluegrass music industry and unity within it. 2) Coordination of the industry’s public image and recognition.” We had to address fears that one aspect of the organization would dominate it on its own or through a coalition. Hylton proposed six categories of membership, each of which would have a seat on the board:

1. Record Companies, Publishers, and Merchandisers,
2. Artists and Composers,
3. Agents and Managers,
4. Talent Buyers,
5. Media and Education, and
6. Associations.^{viii}

Later I came to regret this model as a republic, because it often kept the best talent off the board, while someone less gifted could be elected from a category. This would lead me to insisting that Folk Alliance directors be elected at large. Holsclaw suggested a \$100 founding membership fee, available until December 31st, with no attendant benefits other than listing as a founding member. This device eventually raised \$5700 for the fledgling organization. Harry Grant proudly produced the first C-note.

I moved that we elect a temporary five-person Board of Directors. Elected to the temporary Board were Kuykendall, Lawson, Mills, Osborne, and Poss were elected with Adams and Hartin as alternates. The core group moved quickly to elect Hylton acting treasurer and myself acting secretary. Randall and I were charged with revising the CMA bylaws to fit IBMA. I recall working long into the night of the 13th on a Leading Edge PC clone in some accountant’s office in downtown Nashville.

I knew by then that I could lose myself in this project, making it my single-minded focus. Three decades later I am amazed, because chronic depression would atrophy the skill, at my ability at that time to operate politically, synthesizing different viewpoints in compromises, and using private conversations to guide what happened in open meetings.

Kuykendall deflected the controversy swirling around bluegrass record charts by promising to begin airplay charts in *Bluegrass Unlimited*. Finally, Lawson moved that the Board and Core Group members should meet in Nashville on October 15th and the morning of the 16th, followed a public meeting open to all interested parties that afternoon. The core group adopted that, turning the fine points of dues and bylaws over to the new temporary Board of Directors.

That body, including Randall and I ex officio, began meeting on the afternoon of August 14th. We rapidly established a dues structure and worked through an amazing amount of bylaws issues, reconstructing the CMA documents to fit our vision of IBMA. The board confirmed that IBMA would be a non-profit trade organization under section 501(c)6 of the Internal Revenue Code. The directors voted to hold to the 1986 general membership meeting in October during Country Music Week, something eventually obviated by the partnership with Owensboro, Kentucky. IBMA was to be chartered as a Tennessee Corporation with a Nashville address.

Over the next two-month period we contributed greatly to the new “regional Bell” phone companies’ income planning our first public outing. I knew that the success of organizations like ours depended upon drawing together enough different agendas that a critical mass of potential members could identify their interest in joining. I wrote at the time attempting to delineate such a bag of goals that would build both IBMA’s infrastructure while proving to the bluegrass industry that we could accomplish things by taking on what we knew we could do.

Paramount in my thinking is that we must walk before we can run, yet we must also move forward carefully but relentlessly. We must undertake projects we can complete to demonstrate our worth, then build to bigger things. If we move too slowly we’ll appear useless, too rapidly, and we’ll fall on our collective face.

I initially mentioned IBMA very briefly in the October *Country News* column, with no reference to the October 16 convening.^{ix}

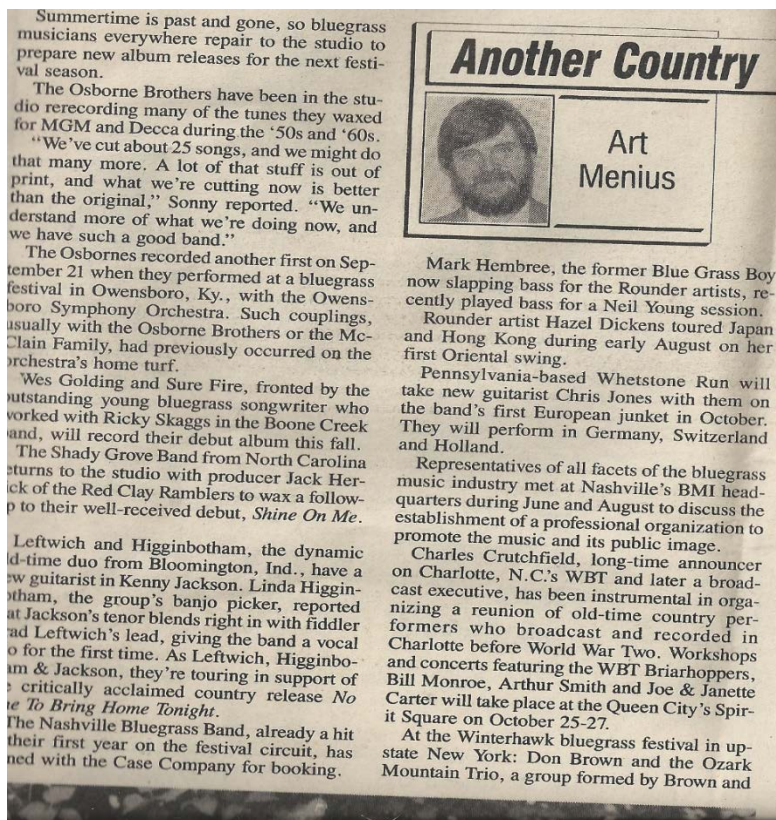


Figure 4 Country News October 1985

Back in early autumn 1985, I had a conceptual breakthrough that would bear fruit at our first public meeting that October: I would use the list of bluegrass media and organizations that I had compiled for "The Liberty Flyer" to demonstrate the size of the bluegrass music industry and how strong it could be if unified. I prepared this data as a set of long dot matrix print outs on those continuous feed sheets that those over fifty can recall. I dramatically unfurled these scrolls as I spoke to that first public meeting.

The Core Group held its final meetings on October 15 and 16. Kuykendall, Osborne, Kitsy O'Meara (soon to be Kuykendall), Hylton, Case, Hartin, Jones, Hicks, Carr, Grant, Mills, Doub, Lawson, Adams, Leroy, Holsclaw, Rebel & County Records owner Dave Freeman, Terry Woodward chair of the Owensboro-Daviess County (KY) Tourism Commission, and I participated the first day. On the 16th, Bruce Hensley, producer of an ephemeral radio series called "Mountain Fever," and Dobro great Gene Wooten joined us.^x

I spent the better part of a month preparing my presentation while the idea of IBMA becoming my job formed in my thoughts. Quite aware of my limited experience as a public speaker, the importance of the moment grew in my mind. Beyond selling the new organization, I also wanted to establish my concept of what IBMA could become as the organization's vision. I had self interest in mind, too. I had to establish myself, despite being relatively new to the field, as a national leader rather than an observer as a writer.

Much like Alexander Hamilton in the eponymous musical play, I knew this was my shot to be more than a free-lance journalist.

I set up the presentation of a large list of ideas for what the incipient IBMA could do. Discovering this list in 2004, I saw that several goals still resonated then, as they would even in 2018. I challenged the audience that day with the following goals, strategies, and action items for the new organization:

- Group health insurance for IBMA members^{xi}
- Create a bluegrass news service to keep the media aware of bluegrass news and potential features
- Create a generic bluegrass press kit
- Compile rosters of media people and outlets, bluegrass associations, and promoters
- Begin acting as a block within the CMA, encourage dual membership and bluegrass participation in mainstream events
- Represent bluegrass to new venues such as colleges, fairs, and folk events
- Publicize our success stories
- Collect bluegrass data. Gather business information and conduct surveys of bluegrass fans. Define what the bluegrass audience is and how much they spend. Include this data in expanded sales kit and use the data to represent bluegrass to investors, record companies, ad agencies and the like
- Lobby for bluegrass postage stamps, [Country Music] Hall of Fame members, etc.
- Secure discounted hotel and transportation rates for IBMA members
- Issue IBMA instructional pamphlets, such as: How to publicize your band
- Festival promotion guidelines
- What's bluegrass and how to find it
- What you should know about talent and recording contracts
- Hold symposia for members, the press, and the public on all aspects of the industry
- Establish at least one major bluegrass publicity garnering event such as a convention/fan fair with awards for lifetime achievements and annual contributions to bluegrass
- Establish Bluegrass Week and coordinate Bluegrass Week activities
- Support and encourage in-store bluegrass displays at record stores
- Establish a bluegrass foundation and create a bluegrass hall of fame.

Much of the above was compiled and adapted from ideas brought forward over the summer. Others were my own invention. Together their major themes consisted of reaching out to mainstream audiences, educating our field and providing resources, and seeking publicity.

We had a wonderful turnout that Wednesday afternoon at Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music. That setting on a university campus projected more than I appreciated at the time the image we wanted to establish for IBMA and bluegrass music as a serious industry serving an evolving genre that required a high level of virtuosity to be played well. I wanted people to know that we were forward looking, not just an exercise in musical, social, and geographical nostalgia.

The day proved a swirl for most of us involved in creating the event. All the core group folk, of course, had plenty of duties from speaking, to greeting, to collecting founding memberships. Most of the officers and directors spoke at least briefly, stressing our potential and state the significance of their pet initiatives. The IBMA office has a guest book from that day that shows who attended this gathering of music folks without a single note played. The Brush Fire band took off from their day jobs and drove up from Atlanta. Ricky Skaggs attended, as did Ronnie Reno and Doug Dillard. The Nashville music media showed up in force. Thanks to people like Ed Morris and Bob Oerman, IBMA quickly appeared in such publications as *Billboard*, *Performance*, *International Musician*, *Country News*, *the Nashville Business Journal*, *Goldmine*, and *the Nashville Tennessean*.

On that early autumn afternoon in Nashville, everything glowed. It became an afternoon of hugs, handshakes, and high fives. Two dozen people had collaborated to create something that could change the field of music we loved in a positive way. Sometimes just the working together provides its own reward. As at any commencement ceremony, it proves hard not to look back upon all the work that led up to this day and view it as a completion rather than a beginning. We had accomplished our goal of establishing that IBMA was a serious, professional organization with industry-wide support and sufficient oversight and safeguards to avoid the pitfalls of its failed predecessors.

Enthusiasm can act almost like a drug that masks differences and personality conflicts. Especially when an organization moves from ideation into function. At the beginning, everyone can pour their own visions into the empty vessel. As IBMA became real, the leaders failed to see that some folks we beginning to feel left out, as invariably happens. Some merely burned out their early excitement. Some Core Group members got elected, and others do not. Somebody misses a conference call, and a decision gets made without them. Real world budget decisions force priorities that require sometimes choices perceived as arbitrary. All organizations make mistakes, especially in their infancy. Typically, in the early days key people can force compromises on the group simply because the other leaders feel their support must be obtained. As organizations grow and become more than just the sum of the membership, the influence of any individual member, even staff or director, decreases. This process always proves very painful and generally colors most of years two through six of a lucky society, much longer for the less fortunate.

Especially, we failed to imagine how fast IBMA would grow. With Kuykendall as board chair, we plotted a solid, conservative course. Our own success soon pressed us to make earlier than we desired decisions on issues such as the partnership we would form with Owensboro or start planning a museum. Given that, talk about maintaining the leadership status quo for a year continued to circulate. Thus, electing a regular board would soon become IBMA's first real internal controversy.

Back home in North Carolina, one phone call stifled my euphoria about IBMA. When the phone rings at six in the morning, you don't stumble out of bed, catching your feet on the sheets and lunging toward the receiver, anticipating good news or a writing assignment. On Wednesday, October 23, 1985, the wake-up call did bring work, but the very worst sort of job. Merle Watson had died. My editor said to have an obituary on his desk by noon. He told me that in the in the very early hours of that morning, Eddy Merle Watson had rolled over his farm tractor on a steep hill side near his home in Caldwell County. Other than a quick writing assignment, I had no idea the impact this tragedy would have on the lives of Becky and me several years down the road.

Since IBMA has yet to go through a true long-range planning process, less than a fortnight after the glorious meeting in Nashville, struggles over where to go and how to get there surfaced. Anyone who has put together a democratically run organization can understand on a very small scale the pressures and fissions that contribute to the instability of young national democracies. People perceive more power plays and dastardly deeds than ever actually occur. The flashpoints erupt among well intentioned people who deeply care about the organization. It became immediately apparent, to me and soon others, that we could not continue as an all-volunteer group. Nor would that enhance our professional image.

I began to assert the need for an employee at an amount we could pay. Inventing a position for which I was the best available candidate became a pattern for my life. It would repeat with Folk Alliance, MerleFest, and SERFA (South East Regional Folk Alliance).

On October 29, I wrote Kuykendall: "It is 3:00 PM Tuesday, and I've already spent fifteen hours working for IBMA this week with much left to do. I intend to get my proposal as acting executive director or temporary horse's ass or whatever you want to call me into the mail tomorrow. I need a job, and IBMA needs me."^{xii}

On November 3rd, I sent the Board my pitch as a three-page letter, which read in part:

The other night I got into my car a worried man. Upset by the fractures in IBMA, I had an aching head and an unsettled stomach. It had grown dark. The daytimer my AM radio dial was tuned to had long since gone to bed. Instead I heard Benny Sims' fiddle break on "Foggy Mountain Breakdown." The announcer for what turned out to be WWNC said the tune had been requested by a 15 year old boy for his birthday. Now that really got me going, and by the time I reached my destination I had most of what I propose below worked out.

These are the testing times for IBMA. Were it easy to form a bluegrass music trade association, it would have been done long ago. We must stick together and work out a compromise. If you leave our mission you won't be able to make your voice known. We have a political structure designed. Let's us put it into effect and use politics to find a common ground, to create a workable consensus. Let's hold together the centrifugal forces and reach a political resolution. Let's make a commitment to IBMA as an organization.

I am proposing the following course of action as a means of getting a dialogue started. We've been arguing among ourselves without offering solutions for too long, so please hear me out. If you have improvements for my suggestions, or a better plan, let us hear it.

To address grumblings about the validity of the temporary board of directors, I proposed a general membership meeting in the spring to bring the supporters together for frank and open sharing of ideas (I called it a "true marketplace of ideas") and elect a board which the members could feel was theirs.

Expressed differently, to have a time where members could participate in something similar to what the Core Group had done. I also called for a sustained membership drive to precede the general meeting.

Pointing out a lack of follow-up to the October meeting, I noted that "no one is responsible for making things happen or answering questions." I asserted that this demonstrated the need for a temporary, part-time executive director, without which "IBMA will rot on the vine," and offered my services for sixty hours per month at \$250 per month. I concluded with a condensed set of activities drawing on my October speech. Each had the same ultimate goal: prove we were legitimate and not ephemeral and that we could already accomplish things.

I would work on the following tasks: (a) publish a bi-monthly newsletter; (b) process membership applications and recruit members; (c) examine grant money and other sources of income; (d) keep Menius' Proposals for IBMA--# channels of communication open and handle IBMA correspondence; (e) develop Certificates of Merit Program and issue certificates to founding members; (f) look into group insurance; (g) plan March meeting and help make arrangements for same; (h) develop an IBMA budget(s); (i) develop a proxy system; (j) create the Bluegrass News Service; and (k) form work committees of members.

I concluded my lengthy missive by quoting a song Uncle Dave Macon had recorded

Throw Off Your Coat
Roll Up Your Sleeves
Jordan Am A Hard Road to Travel
I Believe

Both Hylton and I had expressed interest in the acting executive director, but only I would go for the \$250 per month IBMA could afford to pay for fifteen hours per week. The temporary board hired me during its November 8th teleconference.^{xiii} At the time, I believed that it would be four or five years before IBMA could afford and perhaps even need full-time staff. Remember that in November 2015 we did not know we would be producing a business conference and outdoor festival in less than two years. I even took a six-month, twenty hour a week job with the NC Department of Cultural Resources back to doing

agricultural history research. I had great hope for the association but felt bluegrass people would join slowly as IBMA proved itself to them. I was happy to get a fifteen hour a week job in the field, especially one that allowed me, an introvert who works best in solitude, to telecommute.

Despite the title, my work mostly proved more secretarial than executive. IBMA's first executive office consisted of a small "sewing room" appended to my house and most of the table in the adjoining dining room. I somehow ran the organization for two years using my own computer that was rapidly aging with its 8086 processor and no hard drive. I processed regular and founding memberships, immediately dispatched press releases that Ray Hicks and I prepared, made up letterhead, answered the phone and mail, and began developing resource lists. Those rosters were the low hanging fruit because I had done the bulk of the work for the Linear Group. By rapidly producing compendia of bluegrass radio shows, bluegrass associations, and bluegrass recording companies demonstrated we would act to benefit the field.

The board deemed South Plains College as our "research foundation," without defining what that might mean. Pete and I endeavored to recruit chair people for our various IBMA committees including Owensboro (Poss), group insurance (Adams), Radio (Hicks), Budget (Hylton), Special Events (Harkey), International (Holland's Reink Jansen, who operated the foremost bluegrass recording label in Europe), Certificates of Merit (Doub), and Fund Raising (Hartin). With typesetting provided by *Bluegrass Unlimited*, I sent out the initial, one page, self-mailer edition of *International Bluegrass* early that December. We distributed of 1000 of these, including some 250 that member and former Blue Grass Boy Doug Hutchens was kind enough to include in his December mailing to his acoustic instrument clients. Chairman Kuykendall developed out first membership brochure carefully explaining what IBMA was and was not about since so many questions had already appeared. The brochure was intended both to recruit members, promote the organization, and dispel fears about what IBMA might attempt to do.

By the end of 1985 we had fifty-five individual members (fifty-two who paid the founding fee as well), eleven organizational members, and fourteen patrons (later called Grass Roots Club, for those who did not qualify as a voting individual or organizational member) coming from the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, and Thailand. Yet only eight of the twenty-five core group people had become regular IBMA members. In fact, but three of the six directors belonged to IBMA.

That aside, we did begin setting up processes. I produced a monthly report to the directors about what I had done and those who had joined the organization as Professional or Organizational members. Somewhat like a Rotary Club, the board members were supposed to review the list of individual professional applicants and flag anyone potentially unqualified for further discussion. Per our bylaws, All organizational members required active approval by the board. While we avoided defining bluegrass, we

shared a concern about what defined a professional. That may sound silly today, but we were wary of being taken over by fans and turned into merely a different kind of SPBGMA.

Inside board rooms, what seem like procedural matters can turn into controversies. As my November 3 letter suggested, the first big controversy concerning when the regular board would be elected. The temporary board had just begun functioning well together. Naturally conservative folks wanted to maintain the status quo for a year and lay a solid foundation. Hard choices had to be made, and they would rather have the people they know make them. A suggestion, never made into a motion, surfaced to postpone the directors' election and a decision on hiring an executive director, and establish January 1, 1987 as target date for seating a regularly constituted board. The other faction felt it was time to move ahead with a regular election and get the organization fully functioning as soon as possible. By December we had reached a compromise that called for postal elections in the spring with the first regular board taking office on July 1, 1986.

Resolving the election issue proved the board's ability to reach compromises that allowed IBMA to survive its infancy. The debate, however, suggested deeper divisions and concerns. Distrust between fans of contemporary and traditional bluegrass that manifested non-musical issues. Although based in gross generalizations, assumptions existed causing dysfunction. Despite a plethora of counter-examples, the traditionalists, those most concerned with defining bluegrass, saw progressive wing as the descendants of the hippies, younger, more liberal, and less religious. In addition to the opposite of those mores, many progressives assigned segregationist tendencies to the traditionalists. Avoiding stating that bluntly, I railed against bluegrass as a "faux country club" where people "just like us" congregated in a safe space.

Conflict sometimes existed among local, regional, and national bands, since the latter felt the other two groups took much needed gigs from them by working for small fees. The former feared the more popular bands dominating IBMA. Regional divisions, especially East Coast – West Coast were apparent since the two seemed to live separate worlds, with the occasional, usually East Coast, bands touring on the other side of the continent. While the lower Midwest was closely tied to eastern bluegrass, west of the Mississippi was its own community with its own set of popular bands and a decidedly traditional leaning. Tellingly, the temporary board consisted all of people east of the Mississippi except for the west Texan Hartin as an alternate. Others wondered whether IBMA locating the headquarters in Nashville would be advantageous or a signal of following the country music way. Some simply were skeptical and unwilling to put in an effort. Robert Redford, not the act nor a heartthrob but promoter of the Winfield (Kansas) Bluegrass Festival which, despite its location, successfully wed contemporary acts with a family style atmosphere, frankly told me IBMA could never work. He asserted that bluegrass people could not work together for the common good.

A bifurcated view of Nashville colored matters. For many, including Monroe, Nashville was the home of country music, musicians representing several genre, music publishers and recording labels, and the Grand Ole Opry. It was a city on the Cumberland River where people lived and conducted business in perfect location for touring much of the nation. For others, especially among the part-time bands and fans, a symbol of the changes in the country music industry since 1955. Spurred by the impact of Elvis Presley on country music's market share and of television on radio where live shows had been a staple of bluegrass bands, those initiatives had marginalized bluegrass. Many artists and fans, especially those who followed bluegrass as the only form of traditional country still around, remembered this process and recoiled from something that resembled the CMA.

I realized the irony that I was writing (and would continue until the end of 1986) about bluegrass for a mainstream country publication, while advocating its separation from that genre. I took advantage of my platform in *Country Music News* to announce the creation of IBMA in January. The editor, Vernell Hackett, kindly paired the announcement with a story featuring a photo of Monroe, Skaggs, and Earl Scruggs.



Figure 5 Country News January 1986 xiv

I'm sure many folks' thoughts were colored by whether they believed IBMA should establish a bigger place for bluegrass as part of the country music industry or be the declaration of bluegrass music's

independence. Aligned with the latter, I thought IBMA could become the mother church of all roots music genre. By that I meant far more than overcoming the factionalism of bluegrass with a seat at the table for all, but expanding to include old-time, Louisiana French, Celtic, blues, and what was later called “country music that doesn’t suck.” Despite the “bluegrass” in our name I dreamed of an organization that would resemble IBMA, Americana Music Association, Folk Alliance, and the Blues Foundation all under one roof.

I harbored another dream, a very personal one, of a class of workers who could be called bluegrass professionals. A golfer since age eight, I saw parallels between those two worlds. In both, fans were often practitioners themselves, usually doing more playing themselves than watching. Both golf and bluegrass have thriving equipment business with the amateurs being the primary customers, and the professionals living demonstrators of their wares. The top golfers and bluegrass artists live on the road and are independent contractors without guaranteed income.

What captivated me was the division between professional golfers, who play for ever increasing sums of money on television, and the golf professionals, who served the needs of the amateurs whether instruction or golf balls. I envisioned those of us who worked in non-performing roles being considered as bluegrass professionals, the promoters, record company people, agents, sound crews, and others who made it possible for the musicians to play. While these people existed, they were not considered professionals and sometimes thought of, in Osborne’s words “parasites who fed on musicians.” I saw IBMA having a key role in developing the bluegrass professional class.

Despite Monroe’s “head them off at the pass” directive, Kuykendall, Holtsclaw, Hylton, and I accepted an invitation to speak in January to the SPBGMA Convention in Nashville. Unlike IBMA’s emerging vision for an industry event, SPBGMA offered an endless set of picking sessions all jammed together, a large band contest with unbending rules, a few other performances, and an awards program. I stressed that IBMA was not a social club, anything but a threat to other bluegrass organizations, and not trying to change the music. Much of this volume concerns how my non-musical work would change bluegrass and folk, sometimes in ways I did not support. Len and Randall told the audience that “Now is the time for us to give to IBMA so that IBMA can later give to us.”^{xv}

In the second *Bluegrass Unlimited* issue of 1986, the estimable scholar of bluegrass and pre-World War II country music Dick Spottswood cogently raised many of these concerns in a guest editorial. A veteran discographer and record collector, whose magisterial seven-volume *Ethnic Music on Record* remains an essential reference, Spottswood had contributed to *Bluegrass Unlimited* since he participated in its beginning. Established as one of the best minds in roots music, he made a compelling case for skepticism, although he would soon become an IBMA supporter. He questioned IBMA’s association with Nashville,

whether IBMA was an effort to change the music intentionally for commercial reasons, and whether IBMA would ignore the needs of local and regional musicians In retrospect, Kuykendall likely set this up with Spottswood voicing the skeptics' issues, while giving me the opportunity to respond in the next issue. Done this way, my guest editorial did not appear as aggressive promotion.

My March 1986 response responded directly to each of Spottswood's concerns and contained the points that I would push privately and publicly during the initial year:

- IBMA was a necessary response to an existential threat that was about survival, not getting rich.
- The IBMA leadership, at that time at least, had no desire to change the music to chase popularity.
- Nonetheless, to survive we had to expand the market for bluegrass as we knew it. "[N]ot willy nilly and not be (*sic*) sacrificing the soul that makes bluegrass wonderful." I did not see a contradiction because I believed we could do this by capturing those people who liked the music but did not consider it their favorite. I asserted, therefore, that the potential audience for that organic expansion existed. Both the Public Participation in the Arts and Simmon's Market Research supported this claim with data.
- "IBMA is not here to define, direct, or corrupt bluegrass music." Stating our no definition policy against fears that we would redefine the music the way CMA had country.
- Local and regional bands will be included
- "Bluegrass is a distinctive form of music" rather a subset of country music despite its historical roots. Bluegrass was not, as some promoted after the mainstream success of Skaggs and his former New South bandmate Keith Whitley, a minor league developing talent for country. We appreciated the success of those from our music who rose to greater popularity as we did the respect so many country artists had for bluegrass. The bluegrass music industry, however, did not exist for this purpose. This was an expression of a Declaration of Independence from country music.
- The location in Nashville is neither permanent nor an indication of wanting to change the music for commercial ends. It only meant that we say Nashville as a convenient location that suggested our intention to be a professional trade association.

GUEST EDITORIAL

IBMA Bluegrass People At Work

by Art Menius

In the February issue of *Bluegrass Unlimited* Richard K. Spottswood presented a guest editorial that, like so much of his writing, is a model of thoughtful, constructive criticism. In his discussion of the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) he offers helpful suggestions, presents several positive points, and poses a number of very pertinent questions.

The purpose of reviews, and Spottswood's editorial is in many ways a review, is to provide an objective view. The drawback is that the reviewer does not know the inside story. He must guess at intentions and then comment on them. As temporary Executive Director of IBMA, I should like to both thank member Spottswood for his critical commentary and to respond as an IBMA insider.

IBMA is a result not of prosperity within the bluegrass music industry, but a lack thereof. IBMA actually runs counter to many of the dangerous trends Spottswood apprehends in the creation of IBMA.

The Country Music Association came about in order to make country a popular music, as a side effect it created crossover stars such as Parton and Rogers. In so doing country music lost its very countryness. IBMA has no intention of doing the same to, or for, bluegrass. Bluegrass was commercial in the context of 1946; it is not in the context of 1986. To make it so, one would have to strip it of everything that makes it bluegrass. IBMA is bluegrass people, and

we have no desire to destroy that which we love.

Nor do we want economics to force our brightest young stars to enter the country music or any other field. IBMA wants to create an atmosphere in which a top bluegrass musician can earn a comfortable income by playing music for the people, receive the respect and attention that extraordinary skill at both entertaining and making music deserve, and feel secure that he or she will be taken care of in old age or infirmity by the industry to which he or she has given a career.

IBMA does want to expand the market for bluegrass music, but not willfully, and not by sacrificing the soul that makes bluegrass wonderful. We perceive that there are several million people looking for American family-style entertainment. We see in the success of Windham Hill Records that a sizeable minority of record buyers are sick of pop music. We observe the hundreds of thousands who watch the "Fire On The Mountain" TV show and listen to "A Prairie Home Companion" and similar public radio offerings. We see faces at urban nightclub and concert hall appearances for bluegrass that do not appear at bluegrass festivals.

In short, we know that there exists a large number of people who are right for bluegrass. In IBMA we are pooling our resources and talents so as to publicize what we have, and to devise a marketing strategy that will bring these good folks into bluegrass. How else can our sound survive?

IBMA is not here to define, direct, or corrupt bluegrass music. Bluegrass

fans have always chosen, and will continue to choose, what they want to hear. Bluegrass music can be defined only in the heart, not the head. Any concrete definition either is so vague as to be useless or so restrictive as to be unworkable. The ecumenical approach this magazine has taken provides a worthy model. We must have the older style groups to maintain our heritage, and we must have those who experiment to keep the music alive. That Spottswood so easily labels other styles with other names shows that those of us in bluegrass know what bluegrass is.

IBMA represents the entire bluegrass industry, local, regional, and national. A careful, well ordered growth in the popularity of bluegrass music will benefit those of us who work for and play bluegrass music at all levels. Besides, IBMA is a representative institution, and there are a lot more local and regional acts than big time bands. All they need to do is join, so that their voices can be heard.

The very creation of IBMA signifies that we consider ourselves a distinctive form of music. We realize that bluegrass historically is a sub-genre of country music, but we also know that those of us in bluegrass must stand up for our own. We are a separate institution from CMA, but we can work with them when it benefits bluegrass music.

Nashville has been our base of operations in our organizational infancy simply out of convenience. Many of the bluegrass people who created the impetus for IBMA live in the Nashville area and secured free meeting sites for our planning session there. Already we are geographically diffuse with a board chairman based near Washington, D.C., an executive director living in central North Carolina, a research foundation in Texas, and a treasurer in Nashville. In a short time, moreover, we probably will have an announcement that IBMA's headquarters will be moving to what Spottswood terms a "more appropriate" site.

IBMA is not here to change the music or the people who support it. What we want to change is great musicians starving for their art, shoddy business practices, poor or no promotion, negative public images, second rate productions, and shoe string budgets. IBMA strives to be, as Spottswood suggests, an umbrella for bluegrass people to solve our problems together, to end the self-defeating infighting that has gone on for forty years too long. All we need for success is your help.

BLUEGRASS UNLIMITED

Figure 6 *Bluegrass Unlimited* March 1986^{xvi}

Other people, meanwhile, were trying to achieve their own dreams two hours north of Nashville. Civic visionaries in Owensboro, a small Kentucky city, albeit the Commonwealth's third largest, of 60,000 along the Ohio River, had realized that with Bill Monroe born in the next county, bluegrass music was a natural resource for that part of Kentucky. Starting before IBMA and without knowing about its inception, people in Owensboro talked about a bluegrass festival, a bluegrass trade association, a bluegrass trade show, a bluegrass museum as part of a broader downtown revitalization. In August 1985, the Owensboro-Daviess County Tourist Commission presented a free concert called "Bluegrass With Class" featuring the Osborne Brothers and the Owensboro Symphony. Eventually Poss met Woodward, who owned the Owensboro-based Disk Jockey record store chain, at the convention of independent recording labels. Thus, IBMA met Owensboro.

Woodward quickly realized that IBMA would not just save them the trouble of forming a trade association. In partnership with Owensboro, IBMA could instantly validate their efforts and connect them

Menius-Johnson Chapter two page 22

to the bluegrass industry and its leaders. IBMA could then take over producing a bluegrass festival and professional convention there. An astute businessman, he assumed correctly that IBMA needed money, personnel, and a home.

The minutes for the penultimate Core Group meeting on October 15th report that:

Terry Woodward, chair of the Owensboro Daviess County Tourist Commission, addressed the meeting, saying ODCTC had announced a five-year plan to use bluegrass to boost tourism. Many of their goals paralleled those of IBMA, and they included creation of a bluegrass trade association. Step One was the free festival on 21-22 September. Goals included state funded Bluegrass Hall of Fame; trade show; awards show; all designed to give Owensboro the same recognition for bluegrass music that Nashville has for country music with related businesses clustering around Owensboro as the center of bluegrass. He wants IBMA and ODCTC to mesh offering to set up IBMA with budget, personnel, and facilities. \$90,000 set aside for three years to be spent on anything aiming toward bringing tourism to Owensboro. IBMA office in Owensboro "not absolutely necessary.... Our intention is not to run the [IBMA] Board, but we would like a representative on the Board....I see no problems with business meetings in Nashville and fan oriented activities in Owensboro."^{xvii}

The openness to business activities and an office elsewhere rapidly dissipated. In great measure, in my opinion, the changed came in realization that a town cannot artificially make itself the center of a musical form when only one business, a recording studio, moved there. If the partner they funded would not relocate there, who would?

Our relatively brief courtship during the winter of 1985-86 proved nonetheless heated. Most of the opposition to making Owensboro the home of IBMA concerned timing rather than Owensboro itself. Some may have remained loyal to Nashville, but most not immediately in favor of locating on the banks of the Ohio felt pressed to make such a significant decision within just a couple of months during IBMA's infancy and concerned about merging Owensboro's timetable with ours. Some feared that IBMA was moving away from a music industry center to a backwater. Others saw the move as symbolizing the independence of bluegrass as a genre and business. Still for an organization with such hopes and so few resources, the boost Owensboro offered proved far too much to spurn: funding, staff resources from the Tourism Commission, and a welcoming home.

"If Owensboro did not exist, we would have to invent it," quipped Poss^{xviii}. "We're not giving up anything to Owensboro, and Owensboro isn't giving up anything to IBMA," he had told the IBMA board.

"Owensboro is providing the means for IBMA to achieve our goals of promoting bluegrass, and we would be helping the Owensboro [Daviess County] Tourist Commission's goal of bringing people to Owensboro."^{xix}

Although pressing their rather tangential connection to Bill Monroe, who had undergone an appendectomy there as a youth, no strong case existed for Owensboro being the center of the bluegrass

music universe. Rather, Woodward and his associates observed much of what IBMA's leaders had seen and found an opportunity to advance a bluegrass-based tourism development plan. The largess northwestern Kentucky town served an important purpose for its dreams. The civic leaders' vision, shared by its dynamic new mayor David Atkinson, included a large performance venue called the RiverPark Center as the cornerstone of revitalizing its Ohio River shore. Serving a vast hinterland despite its size, it was easy for Owensboro to overestimate its importance on a larger stage. That local folks referring to US 60, the east-west route through town, as Interstate 60, was telling.

The staff members at the Tourist Commission gave IBMA an address and phone number. They forwarded messages and mail to me in North Carolina. More than the money, support, and a home, Owensboro's true value may have derived from its geographically neutral location that was still convenient to Nashville.

The next March I would fly to Owensboro to formalize an agreement with the Owensboro Daviess County Tourist Commission. The deal differed from Woodward's October presentation. IBMA would make Owensboro its home, hold its major events there, and work with local interests towards a bluegrass museum. IBMA received \$30,000 in seed money, rather liberal use of the staff of the Tourist Commission, and eventually, use of a two-story building belonging to Woodward until the RiverPark Center was completed.

The symbiotic relationship certainly propelled the growth of IBMA and helped Owensboro secure the funding from the Commonwealth to make the RiverPark Center and an International Bluegrass Music Museum happen. While the good things far out weighted the bad, the relationship contained an inherent conflict. Despite the mutual benefit, each party was using the partnership to advance their individual, and sometimes conflicting, missions. The locals had an ambitious vision of Owensboro being a bluegrass branded entertainment and business center mimicking the organic evolution of Nashville. An IBMA office was anticipated to be a lynchpin for the latter. The IBMA leadership wanted to build a community to advance its industry. As early as 1986, Owensboro pushed the organization it supported to establish programs beneficial to the city including being an active partner in establishing a bluegrass museum there and producing their bluegrass festival.

Putting on a festival had not been in our game plan. Osborne, a strong advocate of the partnership, saw the festival would donate all its net revenue to the new IBMA Trust Fund. So, despite prior assurances that we would not compete with our member festivals, IBMA was in the festival business, with Bluegrass With Class, so called due to the Osborne Brothers performing with the Owensboro Symphony becoming Fan Fest, part of our first activity along the Ohio.

Meanwhile, as editor and writer I produced the first multi-page, bimonthly issue of *International Bluegrass*, with Larry Jones handling the layout and printing. Although a mere four pages, the February issue asserted that IBMA was for real and introduced our logo with the globe as a banjo head. Other than IBMA promotion including membership information and a listing of Founding Members, the issue contained a bit of industry news, one piece being a European report. An article announced IBMA's initial services: a media relations function for the field called "Bluegrass Newservice" and rosters, based on my "The Liberty Flyer" lists, of associations and press. I promised a radio guide in March.^{xx}



BOARD OF DIRECTORS KEEPS IBMA MOVING FORWARD

ELECTION SET FOR APRIL

The IBMA temporary Board of Directors slated our first regular elections for April during a teleconference on 30 January. The nominating committee (Art Menius, Barry Poss, Randall Hylton, Doyle Lawson, and Pete Kuykendall) will report to the board on 4 March, and two nominees will be selected for each of the seven positions on the board. These names will be sent to the members, and anyone desiring to stand as a write in candidate should notify the executive director by 31 March so that his or her name may appear in the next issue of *International Bluegrass*.

Ballots will be mailed to the members in mid-April. All ballots returned by voting members in good standing by 1 May will be counted. Results will be mailed to the membership on 9 May. So if you're not yet a voting member, it's time to submit your application if you want your voice to be heard.

The board also decided that in principle an association with the Owensboro/Daviess County Tourist Commission of Kentucky would considerably expedite the achievement of **IBMA's** goals. The commission's board of directors had

previously announced a commitment to **IBMA**. Our board will reach a final decision on Owensboro when Barry Poss' committee makes its final report after conferring with bluegrass music's friends in Owensboro.

"We're not giving up anything to Owensboro, and Owensboro isn't giving up anything to **IBMA**. Owensboro is providing the means for **IBMA** to achieve our goals of promoting bluegrass music, and we would be helping the Owensboro Tourist Commission's goal of bringing people to Owensboro," Poss told the board.

Owensboro has offered **IBMA** a wide range of support services in return for making Owensboro the official home base for **IBMA**.

THE MORE YOU HELP IBMA, THE MORE IBMA CAN HELP YOU

IBMA represents and supports the entire bluegrass music industry—the big name bands and the local groups, independent luthiers and major manufacturers, local associations, disc jockeys, song writers and writers about bluegrass, record companies, music publishers, festival consessionaires and emcees, agents both large and small, and, of course, the fans who make it all possible. As bluegrass events attract more of the right kind of people through **IBMA's** collective efforts in publicity and research all of us will benefit together. The sooner we work

together, the faster we can reach our goals.

How can I help? First, join **IBMA**. Second, let us know of potential members and spread the word. The executive director can send you brochures on request, or you can send him names and addresses, and he will mail the information to them. Third, write the executive director or a board of directors member and let us know what you think **IBMA** should be doing and how it can do it better.

Fourth, join an **IBMA** committee. You can have an active role in building bluegrass music's future through these groups, so contact the chairmen and let them put you to work. Our committees so far are:

FUND RAISING	John Hartin 806-894-9611
RADIO	Ray Hicks 314-364-3071
GROUP INSURANCE	Norman Adams 404-864-7203
OWENSBORO, KY	Barry Poss 919-489-4349
BUDGET	Randall Hylton 615-847-5730
CERTIFICATES OF MERIT	Mary Doub 301-363-1260
INTERNATIONAL	Rienk Janssen 31-05993-12663
EVENTS	Milton Harkey 704-274-5547

Remember, if you are a part of the bluegrass music industry you need to be part of **IBMA**. We're not working to change bluegrass; we're working to insure your future in the music you love. Individual voting memberships are \$35 per year; non-voting \$15; and organizational \$100 per annum. Applications are available from the executive director.

Figure 7 The first four page issue of *International Bluegrass*

Promises for the IBMA to locate in Owensboro made where I lived a slow boil issue, eventually blown far out of proportion for both parties. I had been hired to work from home with less than modest

compensation as part of the reason why. A byproduct of the quick marriage with Owensboro was an expectation I would move there. Yet I was neither paid enough to do so nor provided a new contract.

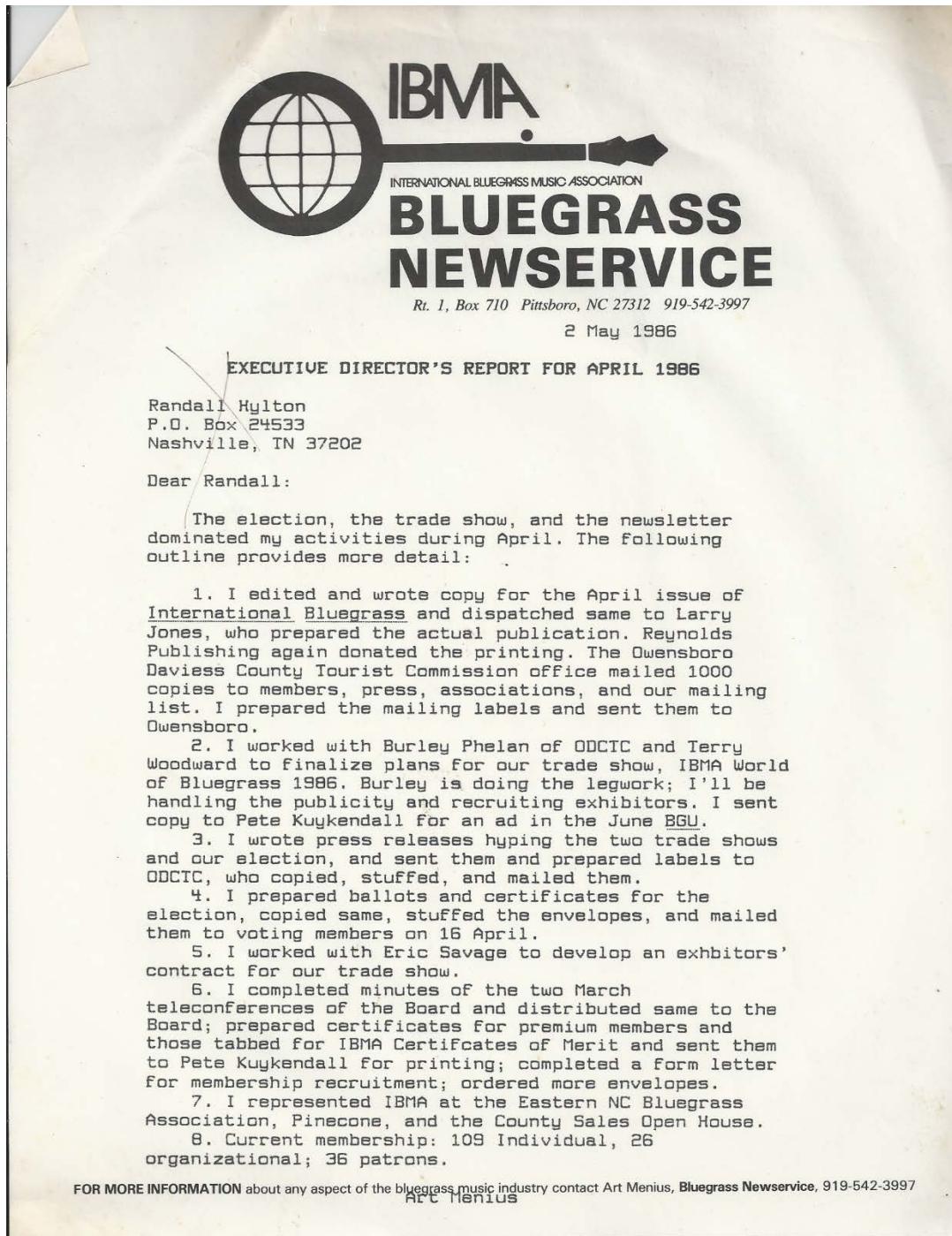


Figure 8 My report to the board for April 1986

By the summer of 1986 my lifestyle had become going to a festival every other weekend to promote IBMA. That year I intentionally “dressed down” in a t-shirt and jeans, a practice I would change over the

next year. In 1986 I thought it important not to be a suit, an industry guy, but to appear to be an ordinary festival goer. In this, I directly reacted to those who feared IBMA becoming the CMA of bluegrass. For fans, whether blue collar or executive, festivals were a place to be away from ties, a place to wear shorts and t-shirts. Only musicians while on stage and visiting politicians wore suits. I wanted to exude being not threatening and transfer that to IBMA. As does any salesperson, I wanted to sell myself in order to sell my product.

Promoters would usually give me a spot for a table and an opportunity to speak on stage. I drove most of the time and occasionally hitched a ride with a band on their bus. That was considerably more fun with people with whom to talk, eat, and play cards. And it gave me insight into the life of a musician. Even though a visitor, I got to experience just a bit of spending each weekend on the road in a van or bus. I climbed into a bunk at 2 AM while the bus rolled on to a distant noon gig. I felt the boredom that comes from traveling for hours or sitting at the merch table when no one was buying. I also witnessed the soldier-like comradery among musicians who had played together for years. I also enjoyed the fun. People who greet the band with a sumptuous, home cooked meal when they arrive after a long drive north of Albany, New York on a bitter, snowy evening. I got to spend hours talking to musicians about anything but music. With the Lost and Found, our bus pulled up to a McDonalds two minutes before closing. The employees apparently thought the bus was full of people for they started cutting off lights and locking doors with military efficiency.

Besides attending festivals in North Carolina and Virginia that could be day trips, I ventured to the Winterhawk Festival in eastern upstate New York and as far south as north Florida's Withlacoochee Bluegrass Festival, traveling with the Bass Mountain Boys. I made the first of many trips to the Wind Gap festival which Grant presented in northeastern Pennsylvania, while going westward to festivals in Lexington, Kentucky, Dahlonaga, Georgia, and Columbus, Ohio. I hopped on the bus with the Lost & Found for late October concerts in Connecticut and New York.

I hitched a ride with the Del McCoury band twice to Withlachoochee. On one of them, Raymond Fairchild, the brilliant and idiosyncratic half-Cherokee banjo player called me to his table. I agreed when he said he and the Crowe Brothers who backed him needed to warmup for their evening set. He pointed out to me that warming up meant no one would be available to sit at his record table. I got the implication and volunteered to do so.

Fairchild opened the cash-filled bank deposit bag commonly used by bluegrass musicians and said, "It's been a powerful good day."

I promised not to let it out of my reach, but that was not sufficient. Raymond pulled out his well-known pistol and jammed it in my pocket. “You’ll need this, buddy.”

When two officers flanked Monroe as he walked by, a flash of fear of being arrested for a perhaps unlicensed firearm in a rural Florida county raced through my mind. My concern about the thing accidentally going off exceeded that, however.

At Winterhawk, I had a booth where I sold raffle tickets to benefit IBMA. Speaking from the stage there, Becky saw me for the first time and learned about the organization. She came to the booth to become a Patron. “I probably read about it in BU [*Bluegrass Unlimited*], but what I remember best is when Art was onstage at Winterhawk in July 1986. I remember seeing Art again at the Chestnut Lodge in October. He was silent, tall and silent.”

I traveled to Louisville for one of the last, if not the last, Kentucky Fried Chicken Bluegrass Festival on the west side of the Galt House in Louisville, future home of IBMA’s World of Bluegrass. After that I made a trip to Owensboro to scout places for me to live. The house hunting did not go well with the realtors acting cold in a way rarely found in that profession. To further exacerbate my reluctance to move, my very first image of Owensboro was a parking lot overflowing with people awaiting processing after being arrested for drugs left me with a negative image. Beyond being somewhere that arrested too many folks to wait inside the police station for processing, the dealers definitely looked like people with whom I did not want to associate. This began the slow unraveling of my tenure with IBMA.

At another stage in life, I would have taken an apartment, but for me the situation was complicated by preference, habit, and financial factors. Part of my low-income survival strategy involved rarely or not at all paying my parents rent on their second house that I occupied in then rural Chatham County, NC, south of Chapel Hill. I had grown accustomed to country living in a single-family unattached home surrounded by woods along a gravel road. Farmers still grew tobacco nearby with leaves falling off along the shoulder of the road. Sometimes I would pick some up, dry them in the oven, and smoke them in a pipe, another limited income practice. Tobacco cultivation was rapidly disappearing from the area, the existing farms an anachronism. I did not want bluegrass to experience that fate, no matter how much fans associated it with a dying way of life.

My parents, not enthusiastic about my career choice and definitely wanting me nearby as they aged, told me clearly that should I move to Owensboro, I would be on my own for lodging. Leaving my friends and family and everything comfortable and familiar provided another barrier to moving. Another nearly twenty years would pass before I moved for a job.

Although I continued to live in North Carolina, by August 1986 I had become a full-time employee of IBMA at a munificent \$540 per month. As of mid-August, IBMA had grown to 161 individual professional and thirty-six organizational members. Artists and Composer had yet to become the dominant category, comprising a bit more than one-third of the membership with only fifteen more members than Media and Education.

Since we still lacked – and would until long after my tenure – a long range plan, I posited fifteen “potential projects” as something of a substitute: 1) a poll of the membership to learn their desires; 2) survey radio and associations and publish the results; 3) compile a list of possible gigs; 4) fashion a generic press kit for bluegrass that could be customized by users, largely in pitching radio shows and soliciting sponsorship; 5) design a new brochure and membership application that presented our accomplishments during the first year; 6) craft a membership recruitment incentive program; 7) establish a “major cold weather trade show with membership & board meetings & talent showcases with fee charged to attend costs include advertising, facility, refreshments, program, insurance, possibly hire show producer, sales brochure, telephone soliciting.” This contrasted sharply with our simple 2016 efforts of booths in a tent at Bluegrass With Class and a small ceremony at the host hotel, the Executive Inn; 8) a guide to touring in Europe since a number of bands wanted to do that; 9) regularly update and thrice per year reprint IBMA’s press, association, and radio guides; 10) develop a guide to collegiate bluegrass programs, which was an odd goal since there were only two or three at the time; 11) begin to collect archival items for the future museum; 12) begin developing master index of string band music publications and especially articles, many of which had appeared in esoteric or ephemeral publications; 13) chase the elusive group insurance program; 14) move the corporate charter to Kentucky; and finally, 15) build an IBMA traveling exhibit for festivals and trade shows, complete with tarp.^{xxi}

Beyond all the travel promoting the organization, I was deeply involved in producing the first IBMA event in Owensboro. Part of the deal was for IBMA to take over Owensboro’s free Bluegrass With Class festival and convert it into a benefit for the Bluegrass Trust Fund. The festival took place on the Ohio River at English Park, where old lock works had been converted into seating facing a temporary stage in the flood plain. This area was underwater most of the winter. A free event, The Osborne Brothers performing with the Owensboro Symphony provided the climax, but the rest of the festival was ticketed for the first time. One day as I walked from the Executive Inn to English Park, a man pointed and shouted, “there’s the SOB who makes my grandmother pay to go to bluegrass.”

Also, we were to start an annual meeting and trade show that August in conjunction with Bluegrass With Class. On the bluff above English Park we put on a very modest Trade Show, much more like a sponsor’s

tent at a big festival than a central aspect of a convention.



Figure 9 English Park 1987 during site prep for festival by Becky Johnson

Doub had proposed and taken charge of the Certificates of Merit initiative to honor people in the field in the years before IBMA adopted a standard entertainment industry awards show and Hall of Fame. The program would consist of an IBMA members reception and Certificates of Merit presentation on the night before restructured Bluegrass With Class. Owensboro's massive Executive Inn, the "Big E," served as our host hotel as it would throughout IBMA's time there. Sprawling but still in good condition, the hotel with its signature central atrium, was the showcase for Owensboro. The facility was also too large for Owensboro to be sustainable. Once it lacked coal mining money to support it, the hotel declined. Eventually, it would be demolished. As we'll see, the deterioration of the Executive Inn would cause the World of Bluegrass and, later, the IBMA offices to leave Owensboro.

Once that event was completed, IBMA approached its first birthday. In many ways, the maturation of the trade association became real during the second year. Assigned by the board, Case and I began planning what we came to call "The World of Bluegrass," later contracted to WOB, consisting of a convention and trade show in the Executive Inn and the Bluegrass Fan Fest, a ticketed fundraising festival in English Park. All the bands would donate their performances and thus become vested in the Bluegrass Trust Fund. The invention of WOB dominated the next chapter of IBMA's development.

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- ⁱ US Department of Commerce, [“Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States, 1985,” Consumer Information](#) (n. 156, August 1987), p. 4
- ⁱⁱ “Liberty Flyer Takes Off: Folk, Bluegrass Get Radio Shot,” *Billboard* (January 19, 1985), pp. 42, 50.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Scully, *The Never-Ending Revival: Rounder Records and the Folk Alliance* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 135.
- ^{iv} Richard Harrington, “Singing the Blues for Bluegrass” *The Washington Post* (March 6, 1988)
- ^v “Public Participation in the Arts [look up complete citation]
- ^{vi} Minutes, IBMA Core Group August 13 & 14, 1985. Author’s collection.
- ^{vii} Minutes, IBMA Core Group August 13 & 14, 1985. Author’s collection. Disregarding jazz, blues, old-time, and Louisiana, many bluegrass supporters claimed it was the American music. See, for example, Barry Willis’ hefty 1997 oral history book *America’s Music: Bluegrass: A History of Bluegrass Music in the Words of Its Pioneers*.
- ^{viii} Minutes, IBMA Core Group August 13 & 14, 1985. Author’s collection.
- ^{ix} Art Menius, [“Another Country: Festival Season Over, Bluegrass Stars Retire to Studio,”](#) *Country News* (October 1985), p. 18
- ^x Minutes, IBMA Core Group, October 15-16, 1985. Author’s collection
- ^{xi} Nearly impossible at the time from a regulatory perspective.
- ^{xii} Art Menius to Pete Kuykendall, October 29, 1985. Author’s collection.
- ^{xiii} Minutes, IBMA Board Teleconference, November 8, 1985. Author’s collection.
- ^{xiv} [Vernell Hackett}, [“Bluegrass: IBMA Names Acting Officers,”](#) *Country News* (January 1986), pp. 1, 4
- ^{xv} “IBMA Leaders Address SPBGMA Convention,” *International Bluegrass* v.1 n. 2 (February 1986), 2.
- ^{xvi} Art Menius, [“IBMA: Bluegrass People at Work,”](#) *Bluegrass Unlimited* (March 1985), p.6
- ^{xvii} Minutes, IBMA Core Group, October 15-16, 1985. Author’s collection.
- ^{xviii} Art Menius, [“1985: A Personal Memoir”](#) *International Bluegrass* (?? 1995), pp.??
- ^{xix} “Board of Directors Keeps IBMA Moving Forward,” *International Bluegrass* v.1 n. 2 (February 1986), 1.
- ^{xx} “Many IBMA Services Available Now,” *International Bluegrass* v.1 n. 2 (February 1986), 2.
- ^{xxi} Art Menius to Randall Hylton, August 16, 1986. Author’s collection.