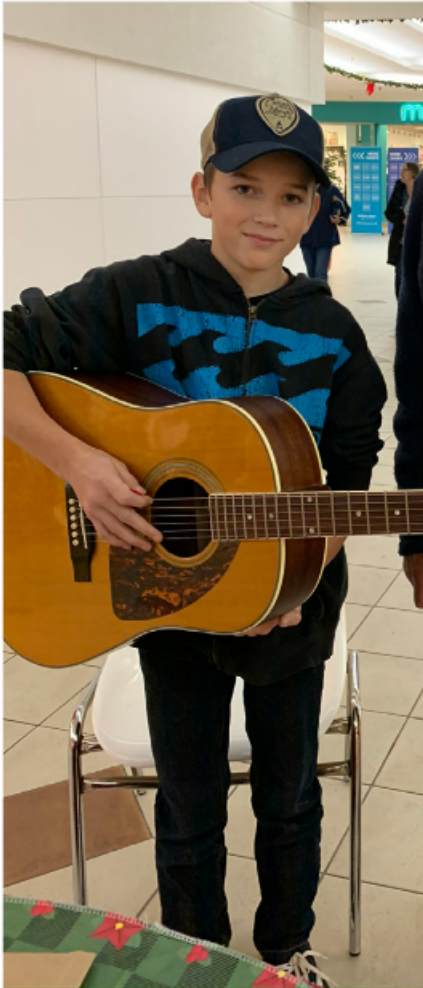


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The kids are alright. This issue we present not one, but two stories about how the kids are taking over bluegrass. The first is on the "Guitars for Kids" program on page 17, and following that is our cover story, "Kids in Bluegrass".



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I absolutely love the fact that there are so many really good banjo players in Canada right now. I have been able to feature several of them in the last number of issues of this BMAC magazine and have a lot more to go, so stay tuned!

# Meet Bob Forrest

Denis reminisces about the “70s” and an outstanding banjo player, in the early days of the Toronto Folklore Centre

By Denis LePage

**T**his month I thought we’d take a look back at a guy who was an outstanding player in Toronto in the 70’s. Back then I was playing ‘professionally’, ie. making a living at it...sort of! On one of my teaching days at the Toronto Folklore Centre I was noodling around with Blackout, a tune that I had just written when a person came into the store, watched me play for a while and introduced himself. It was Bob Forrest. Bob and I played together for a while that day and he subsequently asked me if he could work out a harmony part for Blackout. Well, it didn’t take him long to pick up the lead part which impressed the heck out of me because there are some really gnarley passages (...well, gnarley

for that time, anyway...) Bob came back to the store a few weeks later and we played Blackout with the two parts and it was awesome.

We recorded Blackout together on The Doctor Is In album and Bob’s playing is impeccable.

(Note: it is also the title track of our recently released Switchback Road CD, although without the harmony part.)

Bob went on to complete the tablature book for Carl Jackson’s ‘Banjo Player’ album and has now been living in the Southwest USA for some years. He is a really humble guy and in my opinion, deserves a lot of kudos both for his playing and his influence during the time he was in Toronto. Here is Bob Forrest’s banjo playing story in his own words:

We recorded  
Blackout  
together on  
The Doctor Is  
In album and  
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I lucked out because they had Bill Keith, David Grisman, Fred Weisz on bass and (I think) Phil Ochs on guitar.



Left: Rick Riman. Right: Bob Forrest on right.

We were in my little Triumph TR-6 and all four brakes failed in the mountains of Virginia!

Hi Denis!

Thanks for the kind comments! My first reaction was--- who would be interested in some person they never heard of who met other people they've never heard of. And I'm certainly not famous!

In the mid 60's I had only heard a bit of banjo music on TV such as the Osborne Brothers, and was intrigued. I was attending U of T (living on campus) and I decided to go find a banjo, just for fun. At a nearby music store I found a banjo, case, picks, tuning instructions and capo all for \$30. But I had nobody to turn to for lessons. I had Pete Seeger's book but no BG tabs, no concerts. I bought some records, one of which was "New Dimensions in Banjo and Bluegrass" by Eric Weissberg and Marshall Brickman.

Brickman was prolific, and not just as a banjo player. He was a producer on the Dick Cavett show and a writer for the Tonight Show. He directed and produced a couple of movies. And he co-wrote Annie Hall and Manhattan with Woody Allen. I had already decided to go to New York in December, hoping I could look up some banjo players I could learn from. And I discovered that Brickman was listed in the New York phone book! So I called him from my office in Toronto and told him my intentions -- and it was a big shock when he agreed to meet me. On a snowy night in Manhattan I ran up the subway stairs and there he was, waiting for me. We walked to his apartment and for a few hours he played some banjo, and gave me some tips, and told some stories. (I tried to reach him again online recently but had no luck.)

While in NYC I went to a music store called the Folklore Center, at 110 MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. It was on a Saturday, when they always had an informal mini concert. I lucked out because they had Bill Keith, David Grisman, Fred Weisz on bass and (I think) Phil Ochs on guitar. They did Rawhide and all the usual good stuff. Afterwards I talked to Bill Keith and he agreed to give me a lesson. Next day I went to his apartment and had an hour of melodic banjo plus his hand-

written tabs of what he showed me. Charged me \$20. He told me I would be welcome at an evening jam at a different apartment with Gaither Carlton (Doc Watson's father-in-law), Merle Watson and John Herald (Greenbriar Boys). Keith was supposed to be there but didn't show up. They were cordial to me anyway. That week I also met another banjo player Roger Sprung who tried to sell me a banjo.

This all was thrilling for me and I decided to start going to BG festivals in Berryville Virginia, Hamilton Ohio, and Monroe's Bean Blossom in Indiana to see live BG. (Doug Benson will back me up on this; he went to the first festival in Virginia and I went to the second.)

I had a friend from London, Wayne Willis, with me and it was quite an adventure getting there. We were in my little Triumph TR-6 and all four brakes failed in the mountains of Virginia. It was a bit scary. Only the parking brake was available! The driver would yell "Brake!" when needed and the passenger would yank the brake handle. Had to stop and change places frequently to avoid fatigue. We somehow made it out of the mountains and into the festival. What a relief! Wayne was kind enough to offer to take the car into Roanoke and waited while the dealer replaced all the brakes. I reimbursed him and paid for all his expenses on the trip.

In Berryville I ended up having the only master tape of the festival because the sound man let me plug my RTR recorder into the sound truck. I picked up all the mikes. Everyone else had to record off the central mike only. One guy from Colorado (Rick Riman) found out about this and drove all the way from Denver up to London where I lived at the time, in the snow of winter just to get a copy of those festival tapes. In exchange he gave me a bunch of RTR tapes with dozens of concerts and home sessions featuring all the well known BG-ers. Monroe, McReynolds, White, Rice, Osbornes, on and on. Those were what I used when teaching myself how to do tablature and play more melodic stuff. On RTR they could be slowed down to half speed easily. They kept me busy for years! I was even able to get some

tabs published in Banjo Newsletter.

When I heard Carl Jackson's records in 1974 I wrote him a cold-call letter to see if he wanted a tab book done of his tunes. I didn't know his address, so I sent it to the LA Musicians Union and they forwarded it to him. I still have his first response letter that said, yes! Over the next several years while writing the book I traveled to Vegas and Reno - wherever Glen Campbell played - and was accepted into their inner circle. I had the run of the places, saw the show many times, met some of the opening acts like Joan Rivers, and finalized the book.

The Carl Jackson Banjo book was published by Mel Bay Publications and sold about 6,000 copies before going out of print. I was later contacted by Ronnie Reno's banjo player Mike Scott, and ended up doing a tab book for him too. Every year I get invited to his July 4th blowout BG party in Tennessee, but have never attended.

In Toronto, while at U of T, I saw Frank Wakefield at a coffeehouse. He was unknown at the time; only 10 people showed up - including me, a singer named Jack London, and Joni Mitchell. She was Joni Anderson then. I had lugged my banjo and my RTR recorder up there. It ended up as a small jam rather than a concert. Joni sang a bit and I got to play something when Frank sang, although it was my first time in public and not very good. (Years later I was on a flight to LA which Joni was also on, and she remembered me and we talked for a while.)

A few weeks later, the Greenbriar Boys came to that coffeehouse and that was really excellent. I still have a tape of that concert. Met Bob Yellin (banjo) and he needed a place to stay. I arranged for an unoccupied dorm room at U of T which they rented out for 2 dollars a night. I then got to attend a party with Yellin and John Herald at someone's house

As far as my own playing - well, I always wanted to be good enough to get by, and knew it could never be more than that. (I had a bad left index finger since I was 16 and it didn't bend that well.) It didn't matter because most people don't notice minor slip-ups and misses in banjo playing;



*The band was called The Harding Band and from left to right: Bob Forrest - Banjo, Charles Harding: Guitar, Mike Baron - Mandolin, (possibly) Jesse Smith - guitar, fiddle, Mary Harding - Vocals, guitar, and Zoomer Roberts - Bass.*

only the other musicians do, which is always appreciated. My banjo was a Gibson RB-6, serial #7360-25 circa 1930, with a Satterlee sparkle neck, probably a converted TB-5 or 6.

In Toronto I was in various groups, most notably The Bluegrass Revival with Mike Higgins, Chuck Crawford, Don Hinde and Tom McCreight. I joined the musicians' union and was able to get some picking jobs on radio commercials as well as playing on a CBC summer replacement music show starring Ronnie Prophet, in the house band. As a Chartered Accountant I had met Anne Murray's CA and asked him to ask her if she needed a banjo player. She said she had just hired one. Then I heard that Gordon Lightfoot would be in town for a concert, so I went down to his office, barged in and there he was in a 3-piece suit, at his desk. I asked him if he needed a banjo player, and Featurehe said he had just hired one. Oh well, I tried! I also played on a few records - Eddy Poirier did an album, and of course Denis was kind enough to let me come up with the high part for the original "Black-out" on his album "The Doctor Is In". I also played on an experimental album done on red vinyl and recorded

**In Toronto I was  
in The Bluegrass  
Revival with Mike  
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and Tom McCreight.**

all in one take - no stops between tunes. That took several retakes.

My last real job in Toronto was corporate controller for Merrill Lynch. I had a job offer in Texas, and emigrated in 1979. The employer covered my moving costs. I ended up in Phoenix Arizona doing various accounting jobs and became a dual citizen.

I was in a few BG groups and went to local festivals and concerts. I now run my own little tax and accounting practice from my home office, with clients all over the US from Idaho to Delaware. When my left hand finally gave out for fretting I sold my banjo. Still listen to BG. End of story.