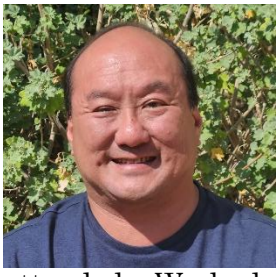
Fiddler's Rag

Vol. 53, Number 05 | Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association | May 2025
Celebrating 52 years | www.fiddlers.org | Next Jam May 4th



President's Note

By Ray Chen

Hello, SCVFA! I hope everyone's enjoying the spring weather!

The April jam was well attended. We had a lot of people at the Old-Time jam with Karen Heil and everyone seemed to have a great time. Most days, some smaller jams break off from the big OT jam but this time, everybody stayed in the big jam with Karen. So I'm confident that we'll bring in a guest fiddler again. We just need to think about how often we should do it. Because of the road race downtown in October, we only have eight Hoover jams a year. Two of them already have special events – the Holiday Potluck and the Annual Meeting – which leaves six Hoover jams left.

So, I think the question is whether to try for two guest old-time fiddlers a year which would leave us with four regular Hoover jams or to try for three? Bringing in guest fiddlers three times a year would mean that five of our Hoover jams would have special events and three would be "regular" jams.

Let me or Susan know if you've got an opinion!! Or send email to *president [at] fiddlers.org*. SCVFA is your organization and we want it to serve you, the members.

The new Young Adult bluegrass jam was also well-attended. We've been hesitant to label this jam as being at a particular level, but it seems to be an advanced jam so we're going to call it that.

Advanced bluegrass jams are different from bluegrass jams aimed at beginner and intermediate level players, and most advanced bluegrass jams are private. This is the only public advanced bluegrass jam that we know of south of San Francisco and Oakland / Berkeley.

We're going to need your understanding and support to make this jam successful, so I encourage everyone to read the article on page 4 about advanced bluegrass jams.

Speaking of advanced jams, I'll be leading an advanced old-time cross-tune jam (see pages 3 & 7 for more info). I'm advertising this as a banjo-friendly jam, because I'll pick a key and we'll play tunes in that key for quite a while before we change to a different key (if we change at all). We'll probably start out playing in A.

It will most likely be an advanced jam, but I'm happy to show tunes that I lead at a slower tempo a few times before playing them at full speed.

Last but not least, I want to thank Susan for driving playouts. We now have a pretty full schedule for May and June – six events over two months!

Thank you, playout participants!! Playouts really help SCVFA raise money so we can keep jam fees low and they're a great way to get more confidence in your playing! Please consider joining in on a playout if you haven't tried it already!

Thanks and I hope to see you at the next jam!!

Future Playouts / Performances

We have numerous opportunities throughout the year.
For more info visit: https://www.fiddlers.org/open-band

May 10th – Our City Forest, 12 – 3 pm, San Jose.
May 18th – Princeton Plaza Farmer's Market, 9 – 1 pm
May 26th – Ardenwood, three 45 min sets from 10 – 3 pm, Fremont
June 14th – Morgan Hill Farmer's Market, 9 – 1 pm
June 21st – Make Music San Jose, TBD
June 29th – Princeton Plaza Farmer's Market, 9 – 1 pm

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The Fiddler's Rag is published monthly by the Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association and is provided to members of the Association. The Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association (SCVFA), founded in 1973 in San Jose, California, is a nonprofit, volunteer-operated organization dedicated to the preservation, teaching, and enjoyment of traditional music. Membership includes electronic delivery of the Fiddler's Rag.

To join, sign up at the jam or see www.fiddlers.org/join-the-scvfa

To Contact the SCVFA:

Mail: SCVFA, P.O. Box 390235, Mountain View, CA 94039-0235
Email to RayChen: *president [at] fiddlers.org*
Susan Goodis: *vp [at] fiddlers.org*
Newsletter Submissions & Comments: *newsletter [at] fiddlers.org*
Address changes: *membership [at] fiddlers.org*
Website: www.fiddlers.org

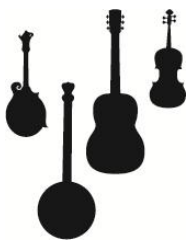
The Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association is a non-profit member-supported organization.

Donations to SCVFA are greatly appreciated and will assist in keeping traditional music alive by passing it on to the next generation.

Many local corporations offer matched donations for non-profits. Check with your employer... they may offer this benefit. You can easily add SCVFA as a 501(c)(3) organization; our EIN is 51-0196154

Donate as you are able
and traditional music will reap the benefits.

SCVFA was founded in 1973 to support fiddling but supports and welcomes musicians other than fiddlers. The image to the right side of the Fiddler's Rag name on the first page includes a mandolin, a banjo, a guitar and a fiddle, to illustrate the diversity of instruments played at our jams and events.



SCVFA Happenings

SCVFA Mission Statement

Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association (SCVFA) preserves traditional music genres that feature fiddle and other acoustic instruments. SCVFA takes pride in "passing it on" to musicians and listeners of all ages and abilities.

Diversity Statement

SCVFA believes that our mission is fundamentally improved by diversity and inclusion. SCVFA is at all times committed to providing an open, safe, and welcoming environment for all our members and guests. We celebrate the varied abilities, ethnicities, sexualities, ages, gender identities, religions and cultural backgrounds of our community, and do not tolerate discrimination based upon these differences.

First Sunday Jam: May 4th 1:00 to 5:00 pm at Hoover Middle School. Suggested donation: $5.00 – more or less as you are able. Click here to donate online.

Old-Time Jam: 1(ish) – 5 pm

Slow jam: 1:30 – 2:30 pm – Tunes are available on our SCVFA website.

Intermediate Bluegrass Jam: 1:30 – 5 pm led by Robert Cornelius.

Young Adult Advanced Bluegrass Jam: 1:30 – 5 pm led by Elijah Chen

Banjo-friendly Advanced Cross-Tune OT Jam: 2 – 3 pm led by Ray Chen

"AFTERS" Join us at The Pasta Market, 579 Coleman Avenue, San Jose.

3rd Sunday Jam: May 18th, 1-3 pm
Washington Park, 840 W. Washington Ave, Sunnyvale

Berkeley Bluegrass Festival: May 2 – 4. The Freight & Salvage, Berkeley

Parkfield Bluegrass Festival: May 9 – 11. Parkfield, CA

Strawberry Music Festival: May 22 – 26. Nevada County Fairgrounds, Grass Valley, CA

John Reischman & The Jaybirds: May 23, 7:30 pm. Fifth Street Farms, Berkeley. House Concert – reservations required!!

CBA Music Camp (Grass Valley): June 9 – 12. Nevada County Fairgrounds, Grass Valley

CBA Father's Day Festival (Grass Valley): June 13-16. The Big Festival!! Nevada County Fairgrounds, Grass Valley, CA

Rhiannon Giddens & The Old-Time Revue: Jun 21, Cal Performances (Zellerbach Hall), Berkeley

Fiddle Tunes, July 1-8. Port Townsend, WA.

Old-Time Jam with guest fiddler, Karen Celia Heil (wearing red cap)

Young Adult Advanced Bluegrass Jam

By Ray Chen

We now have a Young Adult Advanced Bluegrass Jam at SCVFA. Yay!! So what makes an advanced jam different? Why young adults? Who's leading this jam? How can players who aren't as advanced participate? Let's talk about that!

What makes an advanced jam different?

The obvious answer is the musicians: they often play more complicated tunes, they play them faster, and they play them well. However, they also tend to care more about the jam flowing well, the music feeling good, and creating an intense experience for the entire group than they care about having equal opportunities to solo, sing, or call a tune.

That causes advanced jams to do things differently.

Advanced jams are often smaller. The players are accomplished enough that they don't need "safety in numbers." The smaller circle makes it easier on the singers – they can sing more quietly and still be heard. Everyone stays more engaged because what they play is heard. This all helps keeps the energy level higher.

It's easier to be creative in a smaller jam. With bigger jams, too many people mixing things up can step on each other. Fills are great, for example. But three people each doing a different fill at the same time is not so great. The same is true of alternate chord voicings, chord substitutions, rhythm variations and more. The smaller the jam, the easier it is to figure out when to do these, and how to make them sound good.

All of this tends to keep advanced jams smaller. If there are too many people, the leaders will often split the group into two smaller sessions.

Another difference can be the flow of the jam.

In advanced bluegrass jams, who takes breaks is driven by the music. A song may only have two breaks, because it's more about the singing than about giving the instrumentalists a chance to shine. On instrumentals, who goes when may be driven by the instrument, not where they are in the circle. And if someone's on a roll, the leader may go back to that player even though it's not their turn, or tell them to keep going and take a double length break.

People may not go around the circle calling tunes either. Someone might call a few tunes in a row or for long stretches, if things are flowing well.

However, the challenge with advanced jams is that they're more vulnerable to disruptions. Because the jam is trying to find a groove and stay there, things that feel like small speed bumps in a normal jam can feel like massive potholes that jolt everyone out of the groove in an advanced jam.

Things that might be a stumbling block at a normal jam, like calling a tune that the others don't feel comfortable playing or simply don't want to play, playing rhythm out of time or with inappropriate accenting, singing without knowing the lyrics or holding the melody – they all have a heightened impact on advanced jams. These things stand out more with fewer players, and the contrast between those instances and how it feels when everyone's locked in and playing well makes it even worse.

Many people don't realize this. If you're not an advanced enough player that you could get paying gigs playing in small bands on a regular basis if you wanted to, it's all too easy to unknowingly do things in an advanced jam that will disrupt the experience for everyone else.

Because of this, most advanced jams are private. The players only invite people they trust and they often gather at someone's house. Even the public ones are often invitation-only – and if you're not invited, you're welcome to listen but not to play.

We are doing something unusual here at SCVFA. We're trying to host an advanced bluegrass jam in a public space that isn't invitation-only. We want to give our members the chance to listen to, and if they're ready, participate in an advanced jam in a supportive setting. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only advanced bluegrass jam south of San Francisco and Berkeley/Oakland that isn't invitation-only and is held in a public space.

We want to make everyone feel welcome, especially people new to this experience. But if you're in the advanced jam, and playing or behaving in a way that's consistently disruptive, we've asked the jam leader(s) to point out to you what you should or could do instead. However, if your actions remain too disruptive, we've asked the jam leaders to ask you to stop playing. You're more than welcome to keep participating as a listener, but it's not fair to the other players for you to keep playing.

Why are we targeting young adults with this jam and what about everyone else?

Our core mission is to support traditional music. We have plenty of older players at our jams, so we know we're helping them. But we're really short on representation from the younger generations.

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The thought behind a Young Adult Jam is first, if younger players see players their own age, they're more likely to think that SCFVA welcomes young players and more likely to want to return. Second, even if they never come back, if they come and make contact with other young players and keep playing as a result, that's a huge success for us.

We decided to focus on young adults instead of children or teens, because it's easier for young adults to get to Hoover. They don't need their parents to take them and/or stay for the afternoon.

People of all ages are welcome to join the jam but if the jam gets too big, we've asked the jam leaders to prioritize young adults first, children and teens second, and everyone else third. The jam leaders will suggest that some people split off to form their own smaller jam.

Who's leading this jam?

Well, if we have a jam targeted at young adults, we thought it best if the jam leaders were also young adults.

We're fortunate that Elijah Chen and Ruby Davis have agreed to lead the Young Adult jam. They're young adults who also happen to be two of the best up and coming young bluegrass musicians in the Bay Area. We're lucky to have them!

How can players who aren't as advanced participate?

The easiest way is to help reinforce the rhythm and pass on the solos. The guitar players have it best. Guitars are quieter, so it takes more guitars to overwhelm a jam than say, banjos or basses. So if you can get your boom-chuck rhythm really solid and can pick up chord changes quickly, you can add to almost any jam.

The other way, of course, is to pull up a chair, sit outside the circle and *really* listen. You can learn a lot from listening to advanced players. And if you don't feel like working that hard, think of it as having a front row seat to a mini-concert!

How can we help?

Please help us by being your usual kind, welcoming selves, and by understanding and supporting the jam leaders if they make suggestions or have to intervene.

Thanks, everyone and play on!!

SCVFA Jamming

By Cliff Riggs

I carry this vision of old-time music around with me every day. The tunes are always present, and when we play together, we briefly capture something special from the world around us. Even when I'm not playing – simply seeing, or even just knowing that people are gathering somewhere to pick these tunes out of the universe – I feel like some good is being brought to us all. While I can't attend every jam, knowing that there are people playing music together reassures me that the world and its people are better off for it. So let's get jamming!

Playing together in a jam, large or small, is the heart and soul of our music. However, it's not always easy to start jamming. I began playing later in life – in my 40s – with no prior musical experience, and it was quite intimidating to join a big circle of people who seemed to know an endless list of tunes. Even then, I sensed something magical that I wanted to understand better and become a part of. My goal quickly became figuring out, "How do I get in on this so I can contribute rather than feel overwhelmed?"

Regardless of your musical experience – but especially if you are new – one of the best things you can do to advance your playing is to find a few people to regularly play tunes with. A large jam once or twice a month is wonderful, and I'm grateful that the SCVFA provides these opportunities. But if you're learning old-time or bluegrass, make a dedicated effort to find others to jam with in a smaller setting. When I started, sitting nervously on the outer fringes of the jam circle, I introduced myself to three other players who were also new and sitting on the sidelines, and asked, "Hey, would you folks like to meet up for some smaller jams? I don't know many tunes yet, but if each of us can share a few tunes we know before we meet, I can try to learn them beforehand."

For about a year, we learned tunes from each other in a comfortable, supportive environment. Our jam was small enough – and we were all new enough – that we could easily say things like, "I have no idea what just happened; can we try that again?" or, "That didn't sound right—what do you think the chord progression is?" or, "I almost got it; can we play that A part a few more times?" or even, "I found this fun tune; let's learn it for next time." These conversations are much easier in a small group than in a large jam circle.

It's my hope that we'll soon have a "jam builder" feature on the SCVFA website. Until then, all of us on the SCVFA board strongly encourage members –

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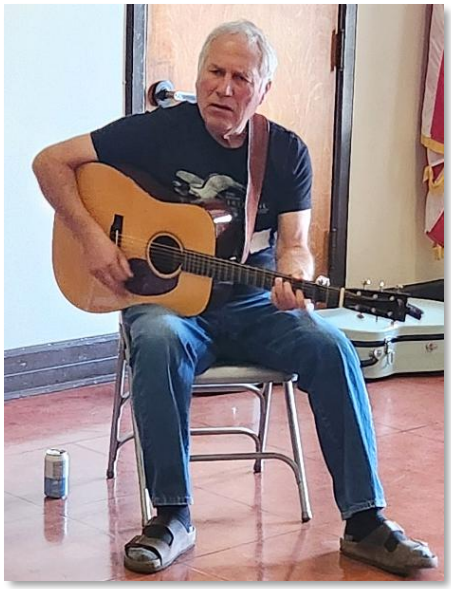
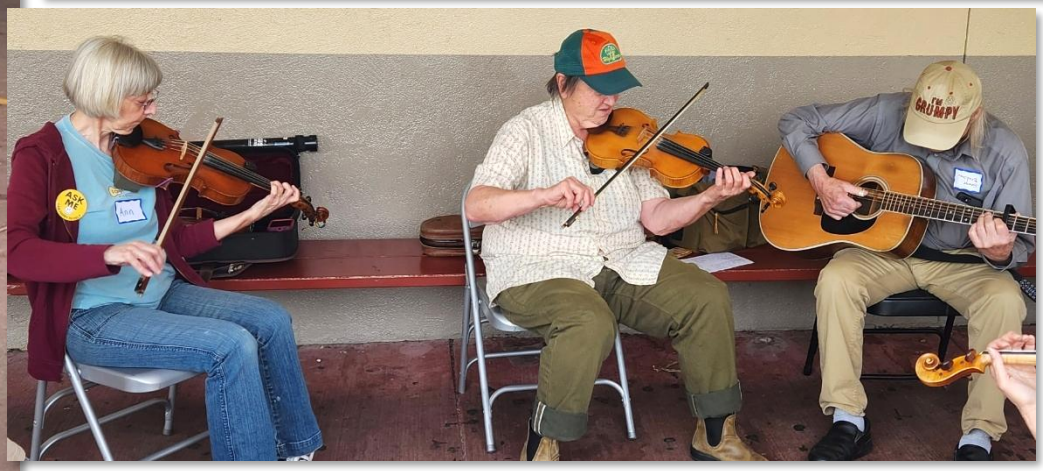
May Pictures

By Ray Chen





Advanced and Cross-Tuned OT Jams

By Ray Chen

I'll be leading an advanced cross-tune old-time jam for an hour or so at the next First Sunday jam. I want to give old-time banjos a place to play and support the Board's desire to encourage people to start their own jams.

What's a cross-tune jam?

A cross-tune jam is a jam where the banjos and fiddles can tune to a specific key and stay there for a long time. People only call tunes that work in that tuning until the jam decides it's done with that tuning and switches to a different tuning.

This makes the jam banjo-friendly. Banjos have to tune to a key, so every time someone leads a tune in a different key, the banjos have to retune. Worse yet, if people aren't aware of the impact of key change on the banjos and just start the tune, the banjos have to retune while everyone else is playing! Not a fun time.

For fiddles, standard tuning is great for playing in any key. But if they know they're going to stay in one key for a long time, fiddles can use tunings optimized for playing in that key.

In the old-time world, these are called "cross" tunings. The two most popular cross tunings are for the keys of A and D. For A, fiddles will tune from GDAE to AEAE – raising each of the two low strings up one pitch. This tuning is known as "cross-A" or simply A. For D, the fiddles just tune the G string up to A (ADAE), so this tuning is also known as "high bass."

Cross-tunings make it easier for fiddlers to drone and hit chords using open strings, so it's not a surprise that in the Southeast, where banjos were commonly played, fiddlers developed tunes and even styles that take advantage of this. West Virginia, Kentucky, and North Carolina are known for tunes that are meant to be played out of cross tunings. Tommy Jarrell's bow-rocking style works a *lot* better if you're playing in a tuning where an adjacent string can be used for drones and chords because that string is tuned to a note that's in the desired chord.

These tunings also make the fiddles more resonant and louder which really helps if the only musicians you have for a dance were a fiddle and banjo or just a fiddle.

As you get farther away from "banjo-land," cross-tuning and cross-tune jams get less and less common. Even today, most jams in the Southeast will pick a key and stay there for long time, whereas in other parts of the country, changing keys at random is often the norm. In the past, cross-tuning was even thought of in many parts of the country as "trick fiddling" or "cheating."

What's different in an advanced old-time jam?

The biggest difference is a greater focus on making music that "feels good." That shows up as a change in who calls the tunes. Beginner / intermediate old-time jams tend to let everyone call tunes. The more advanced jams tend to let the melody instruments call tunes on the theory that things will go better if the melody instruments play tunes they know well. High-level jams will typically defer to one or two fiddle players and often to just one of them.

So high-level jams often turn into "alpha fiddler jams" that some of you may have seen, where one fiddler gets into a groove and starts reeling off tune after tune after tune, like a DJ spinning records. They typically don't even name the tune. The rest of the jam just jumps in when it's clear that the fiddler has found the tune and set the tempo.

None of this is typically talked about or discussed – it just happens on its own.

I don't know how this jam will go. I'm guessing we won't play any tunes that the fiddlers don't know well, but we'll figure it out as we go. These things tend to happen organically and it's probably best that way.

Hopefully, we'll have fun playing music. That's what really matters, after all!

(SCVFA Jamming – continued from page 5)

especially newer players – to proactively find or create a small jam. You'll be amazed at how quickly this improves both your playing and your confidence.

If you have questions about how to get started or would like help connecting with others, please find a board member wearing a big yellow "I Can Help" button at our monthly jams. We'd be delighted to brainstorm ways to get you connected!

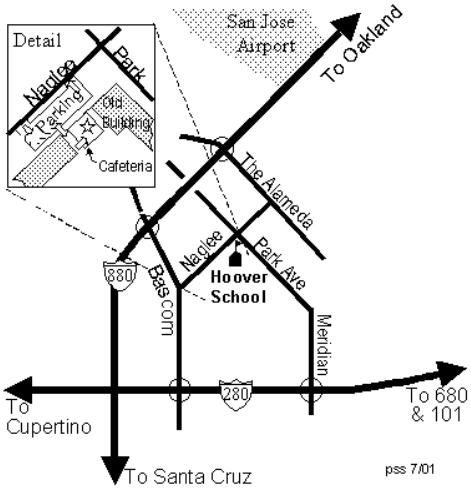
[Editor's note: a number of bands started out as SCVFA members who got together to play outside of the monthly jam. At least one of them was a group of relative beginners. That group is now a band, Against The Grain, that plays regularly at local farmer's markets and other venues.]

SCVFA
P.O. Box 390235
Mountain View, CA 94039-0235

Next Jam:
Sunday May 4th
1-5 pm at Hoover Middle School

The SCVFA Jam usually on the first Sunday of each month. Location: Hoover Middle School, 1474 Naglee Ave., San Jose. The school is at the corner of Naglee and Park. Cafeteria parking is on the Naglee side.

Damaged or Missing Issue? Call us, or email to: *newsletter [at] fiddlers.org*



Bluegrass Jam (above), small bluegrass jam (top)

Updated Bluegrass Jamming Rules

- The leader chooses the next soloist and when to end. For songs, the leader is the person who sings the verses. For instrumentals, it's the person who kicks it off or asks someone else to kick it off for them.
- Pick tunes that people know or are easy to learn (easy key, standard chord progressions, simple lyrics).
- Use signals to offer, accept, and pass on solos and to end the tune. Signals are body-language only!
- Listen to the music and watch for the signals. The more advanced the jam, the more this matters.
- Minimize the time spent looking at sheet music or an electronic device. Try not use them at all, if you can.
- The singer / soloist is always right – if they change tempo or start late, follow them anyway.
- Support the singer / soloist. Give them room to be heard and to improvise by:
  - Playing quietly with basic, unsyncopated rhythm.
  - Not singing harmony on verses unless asked.
  - Not singing at all during instrumental solos.
- When in doubt, ask questions (but please don't argue with the answers – sessions may have their own rules).