

A Bluegrass Family – 25 Years at home and on the Road

A bluegrass band that has had its own successful festival in Switzerland for 15 years sounds unusual, doesn't it? A Swiss bluegrass band with its own LPs (2) and CDs (1) is certainly unusual. A bluegrass band that has the stature to have played at the smallest and largest venues in the country with an equal amount of acclaim and modesty is also unusual but also a fate shared by too many good bands in the relatively narrow bluegrass scene in Europe.

But an ensemble that has been together as a band and family under the same roof for 25 years is not only unusual but, you guessed it, extraordinary. Let's see, there are two married

by Kent Miller

couples so that would be the first four. Finn Bodenmann plays lead guitar and sings; his wife, Kathi, is on the bass. Fridbi Bonin plays mandolin and his wife, Marlies is on rhythm guitar and sings lead and harmony. They have two children. Dobro player Theo Hurter, Marlies's brother, is the only member of the band that lives outside of the big (actually not that big) house down on the Reuss river in the heart of the Swiss "midlands". Of course, in the beginning, Theo lived right there with all the others. Christoph Kampf on fiddle has been a member of the "Family" since the beginning. And finally, representing the second generation, Tom Bodenmann on banjo. His predecessor was none other than Jens Krijger of Kruger Brothers fame. Jens had a long stint with the band for about 6 years in the 80s. and earned his bluegrass spurs practicing in the shed behind the house.

The Bluegrass Family

By now you will have guessed that this band is actually called the Bluegrass Family, and officially and appropriately not "The Bluegrass Family Band" or anything like that. Ask any bluegrass fan in Switzerland about the "Family" and you won't get any scratching or shaking of heads. These guys are well known and appreciated. I know this already seems incredible but there is a lot more to the story. It is important to also say what this band is not.

Swiss people playing bluegrass

We are not talking about mutant America fans that think they are reincarnated Navajo Indians or black-powder pioneers sitting blue around a camp fire in homemade buckskins. On the other hand they are also not just a bunch of people that live together, call themselves a band and play a little every other Sunday afternoon. So what makes our first family of bluegrass in Switzerland tick? The members of the band hold regular jobs, are devoted to their families, and committed to playing and promoting nail-hard, traditional bluegrass. In fact, after some skepticism in the early years, they have been embraced by the smallish town of Stetten. This has been a key to the success of their festival. It doesn't always work out that way. Getting back to the music, The Bluegrass Family obviously strives to play the best music they can. They practice every Tuesday without exception (except for trips to the U.S. to visit friends and tank up on inspiration and ideas). They have a huge repertoire; at one time or another they have played a lot of the traditional bluegrass songs from the founding bands and artists. Like most bands today, they look for new material anywhere they can find it. They are not adverse to playing a good country tune or something bluesy or jazzy, but everything they do includes all of the instruments and has that bluegrass drive. That's why we love them. No compromising here. In fact, after Jens left the group for U.S. glory, the band limited its public appearances to mainly the festival rather than changing their style or becoming dependent on "outside help". Luckily, young Tom was a fast learner and is now one of the premier banjo players in Europe.

Obviously, we are talking about the consummate live band here. What you see is what you get. Seven musicians that sound the same whether they are standing in a field at a festival or on stage in one of the larger stadiums. Finn knows what he wants to hear and the band delivers. His MC work in his broad Zurich Swiss German dialect is a highlight of their festival. Fridbi is a modest, probably underrated, mandolin player that can provide great solos on his proudly-owned Swiss-made mandolin. Marlies is not only "head of business" but also has the perfect bluegrass voice. Heaven is when she sings harmony with you. Theo's dobro gives the band the breadth that so many bands lack. He also sings some great soulful songs and adds the gospel touch. Christoph on the fiddle capably adds another essential bluegrass element and a lot of great musicianship inherited from a musical family. And Kathi never misses a beat on the bass. Even her oldest child (of three) can't "get away" from her on the fast banjo breaks.

The band is proud of their long list of TV and concert appearances and awards. Over the years they have shared the stage with bands such as Doyle Lawson, Blue Highway, The Lonesome River Band and many others. Still, the Bluegrass Family has had to make the same choices as most good non-full time bands. How much to play. How far to travel. How much lost family time is a given gig worth. I think they feel there is no use worrying about a road not taken. Around Switzerland, they have always maintained the same high standards and been generous with their time. As they see themselves as ambassadors of bluegrass, no gig is too small or meaningless.

Professional but not commercial

This is a band that might scorn a commercial gig for some fat cat to play at a handicap center or senior home. They also support the other bluegrass activities around the country. They have appeared at all the numerous Swiss summer festivals and the Swiss Bluegrass Music Association's Winter



Festival. After some early skepticism, the Bluegrass Family has supported a lot of the SBMA's activities. They have sponsored American bands, even finding room to have bands stay at their home. I guess a few more doesn't matter after the first dozen. Kathi ran the monthly Bluegrass Cafe for two successful seasons and the rest of the "Family" have contributed a lot of time to making the programs interesting. They are all great teachers and very knowledgeable about their instruments and bluegrass in general. Not a small number of players in this little country were influenced by the Bluegrass family. Marlies contributed her festival experience to the OC of the 2nd SBMA Winter Festival.

25 years and counting

I know this all sounds crazy, but I am not making any of it up. I can hear our readers thinking, "Oh sure, they live 25 years together when most small families fall apart after less than half that time. Let's hear the other side. There must be a small attempted murder or something to juice up the story."

Nope, and I can't explain it, but I can give you a hint. If you go to visit the "Family" you might find them all scattered throughout the house doing their own things, or they may all be playing music together or stuffing envelopes to send out invitations for the festival. They seem to be a family,

good neighbors and rood friends all at the same time.

Memories and plans

And if you are lucky enough to visit them and ask about the last 25 years, you will hear some of their highlights and stories. About starting out as a trio on the streets of Zurich, The thrill of winning the best country band award way back in 1979. Putting the kids to bed and taking off to another hot gig with Jens Krüger in the band's Mercedes bus. And the time the car top carrier sprang open on the Autobahn and out flew a very nice bass fiddle. The largest piece left was not worth mentioning. But The Bluegrass Family is not resting on their laurels. They are still learning new stuff and actually getting better every year.

Bluegrass rewards

Getting back to the past. I want to mention my most memorable highlight because it is so typical. A couple years ago. The Bluegrass Family agreed to play, on 1 hour's notice, a whole 70 minute gig to fill in the time when a California band was late getting to an SBMA concert. They know what it takes to bring the music to the people and they know that worldly rewards are not always in the cards for every good bluegrass band or good bluegrass deed. And that, friends, is unusual, unique and down right uplifting.

The Bluegrass Family (left to right): Fridbi Bonin (mand), Tom Bodenmann (bjo), Finn Bodenmann (git), Kathy Bodenmann (bs), Marlis Bonin (git), Theo Hurter (dob), Christoph Kempf (fid).