

# Quarterly Newsletter

## Building a better BBMA

Winter offers a respite from the hustle and bustle of warmer times of a year and a little opportunity for reflection.

We here at the Badgerland Bluegrass Music Association know a regional bluegrass organization can serve a lot of different purposes.

With time and resources not in infinite supply, bluegrass associations are usually best off picking a few priorities and pursuing those first and foremost. We at BBMA are now doing a bit of soul-searching, trying to decide what we can best devote our energies to.

Of course, there's our signature event: the annual Big Thaw concert featuring local musicians every April. This has always been a big part of our reason for existing and will remain that way.

But there are always questions about just what sort of festivals it should be. Does it primarily exist to give BBMA members an outlet for showcasing their talents? Should BBMA board members be mainly arranging for their own bands and their friends' bands to play? Or should we be reaching outside the BBMA to invite groups perhaps from other parts of the state, outside the BBMA's geographic reach?



The BBMA's mission will always be to promote local talent. But we also want to put on the best Big Thaw concerts we can, and maybe shouldn't let a too strict definition of "local" get in the way of booking acts.

Then there are the bigger questions about the BBMA's purpose in general. What should we be doing when we're not organizing the Big Thaw? How can we do more to promote local bluegrass groups and talent? In what ways are we now falling short?

We'd love to hear your thoughts on any of this.

— Dan Shaw, BBMA vice president

# The Bluegrass Jam at The Gig

## Its origins and evolution

The Gig is a bar in the Riverwest neighborhood in Milwaukee that has evolved into a fixture in the Badgerland Bluegrass scene as a place for live music as well as a weekly bluegrass jam.

According to its owner, Barry Lewis, the bar has played host to an array of live music performances since opening for business in 2001 but didn't become actively involved in bluegrass until roughly 12 to 15 years ago.

Lewis has been the owner of The Gig since 2001 and, before that, was the general manager of Major Goolsby's, a highly-successful sports bar near what is now the UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena. Similar to the pattern at Major Goolsby's, sports events and Packer games in particular, were the biggest draws for patrons at The Gig.

The Sunday bluegrass jam was an idea that was proposed to him by Jordan Kroeger to fill the Packer void. Jordan sensed that there would be a market for a jam because the only other option at the time for an authentic bluegrass jamming experience was in Washington County. He believed there were plenty of pickers that were passionate enough about the genre to seek out a place to meet other bluegrass musicians.

Barry concedes that he was a little leery of the idea since he had no previous experience with bluegrass jams and he would be venturing into unknown business territory. He eventually was able to soften his skepticism and was willing to give the jam a try.

Jordan served as the host of the earliest jams and got the word out on dates and times. According to Barry, the scheduling of the Sunday jams started after Super Bowl Sunday and would extend to the summer music festival season. In 2016, for example, August 28th marked the last bluegrass jam of the year and the start of a hibernation period until football season was over.

The scheduling was somewhat scattered and irregular at first, and jam dates and times were communicated mostly through word of mouth as well as through social media posts. Jams were small at first, but steadily grew in numbers while maintaining the scheduling policy of not competing with Packer games.

The Gig offered a distinct jamming experience because it placed greater emphasis on instrumental tunes and gave jammers an opportunity to test and polish their chops.

Over time, Jordan's schedule got too hectic and prevented him from continuing in his role as host. Chad Witty was willing to fill in and served as the primary host starting from around 2014 to the pandemic, with Brian Krause occasionally filling in.

Joe Wais assumed the role as host after the pandemic and eventually he also had to step back with weekend shows affecting his availability. The current jam has become pretty much self-regulated and self-sustaining without a recognized jam leader.

Another development that gradually emerged was a departure from the old pattern for scheduling jams around the Packer's schedule. By 2019, the jams were meeting virtually every Sunday, but start times were often adjusted to account for early games, etc. The start times for the jam also were shifted from the original 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. duration to 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. after 2017.

All the early jams were held indoors, in either the bar area or occasionally in the pool room. Barry was very cautious at first, making sure that the jam stayed indoors in an effort to avoid annoying any of his Riverwest neighbors. However, one warm summer day, a few pickers ventured out on to the deck behind The Gig to enjoy the balmy summer weather while they jammed away.

To Barry's surprise and relief, no objections or complaints were voiced by any of his neighbors and one neighbor even stopped by with her guitar to join the next jam.

The neighbors accepted and embraced the music, which adds an uplifting ambience and instills a spirit of fun in the air in Riverwest. The practice of jamming on the patio has become a warm weather tradition ever since.

As The Gig was becoming recognized as an active supporter of the bluegrass scene over time, Jordan encouraged Barry to book bands that were touring the area and to play host to ongoing bluegrass events. The shows and events were well-received by audiences and bluegrass events are currently hosted on a weekly basis.

Events have included 29 Bangerangs and live music virtually every Wednesday, including Dead Nights, Open Mics or Sugarbush shows. Bluegrass bands that have performed on The Gig stage include Chicken Wire Empire, Horseshoes & Hand Grenades, River Valley Rangers, Miles Over Mountains, The MilBillies, The Honeygoats, Sugarbush, Salt Creek, Brewtown Brewgrass and The Barred Owl Stringband. Many of the bands mentioned were local, up-and-coming acts at the time they were booked.

Barry Lewis and The Gig have been great supporters of local bluegrass musicians, and this venue has played a very influential role in helping local bands grow, gain recognition and establish themselves on a larger stage.

—Richard Smalls

# CALENDAR

## Recurring events

- Every Tuesday, Bluegrass Whatever's, 7 to 9 p.m., Nashville North, 1216 E. Brady St., Milwaukee
- Second Wednesday of the month, Bluegrass Bangarang, 9 to 11 p.m., The Gig, 1132 E. Wright St. Milwaukee

# OPEN JAMS

- October through May, the second Sunday of every month, 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m., Dr. Dawg, 6969 N. Port Washington Road, Glendale, 1:30 - 4 pm
- Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. at the Gig in Riverwest
- First and third Wednesdays of the month, starting at 6 p.m. at Marty's Restaurant and Fiesta Hall, 201 W. Main St., Waterford
- First and third Thursday of the month, Bluegrass jam with KR Bluegrass, Route 20 Music Bar and Grill, 14001 Washington Ave., Sturtevant

## JOIN THE BADGERLAND BLUEGRASS MUSIC ASSOCIATION

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Bluegrass instrument(s) you play:

Banjo  Guitar  Fiddle  Bass  Mandolin  Dobro  Other \_\_\_\_\_

Membership preference (All memberships are due July of each year)

New  Renewal

Individual - \$15  Family \$20  Corporate - \$30  Band \$40

**MAIL YOUR CHECK TO: PO BOX 989, TWIN LAKES, WI 53181**