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## The Not So Run of the Mill String Band

by Todd Denton

Tree-lined suburbs of Philadelphia may seem an unlikely place to find good old-time southern string band music. Yet this is the home of one of America's most vibrant old-time music communities and the widely acclaimed but humbly named Run of the Mill String Band. For the last 25 years, the core trio of Palmer and Greg Loux and Paul Sidlick has honed skills at dances and contests, blending powerful, dance-driving rhythm with easy-going musical sophistication. They continue to be very active, with a new CD, *Steal Aboard*, more public appearances, and the addition of a long-time stalwart of the Philadelphia old-time community, Tom Schaffer on bass fiddle. Despite the band's name, there is nothing "run of the mill" about this band.

The Run of the Mill story began in 1980 at a newly opened bicycle shop in Malvern, Pennsylvania. Its proprietor, guitarist Paul Sidlick, and his friend banjoist Tim Brown, recently

relocated from Boston, would retreat to the shop's repair room after hours to play tunes. Fiddler Palmer Loux (then Turnburke) met Paul and Tim at the Philadelphia Old-Time and Bluegrass Festival and they soon formed a working band they called Linsey-Woolsey. A bit later, guitarist Greg Loux (pronounced "loucks") met Palmer at another festival, and while they were getting to know each other, Palmer introduced Greg to Paul, Tim, and old-time music.

When Tim Brown left the band, Paul Sidlick switched to banjo and Greg Loux became the guitarist. About the name, Greg recalls thinking that "Run of the Mill [String Band] seemed like a fun idea. Self-deprecating names in old-time music are not that unusual." They recently tried to come up with something different, but after so many years, they didn't want to lose their brand recognition. Besides, Greg adds, "it's a

reminder not to take ourselves too seriously."

Palmer Turnburke fell in love with the sound of the violin when she heard a young neighbor girl play a sweet version of "Lightly Row." After finding a good instrument and the right teacher, eight-year-old Palmer was on her way: "My grandmother bought me a lovely little violin, which [we] still have." In the mid-1970s, she went to Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. On a Memorial Day weekend in 1977 she made the first of many life-changing treks to the Fiddler's Grove convention in Union Grove, North Carolina. Since she only knew four or five fiddle tunes, she spent her time at Union Grove just listening, sitting in the stage area, taping the whole thing. Working from that tape, she had enough of the basic repertoire by summer's end that she could "walk into any jam and just start playing."

With renewed confidence and excitement for old-time fiddling, Palmer returned to Furman for her junior year. She recalls twin fiddling with Nick Hallman at Fiddler's Grove when she met Byard Ray for the first time. "His eyes lit up and he asked Nick, 'where did you get that little doll fiddler?'" She and Byard became friends and enjoyed working up twin fiddle tunes for the contest. Later that year, she joined his band the Appalachian Folks in a performance at the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival in Mars Hill. Another Fiddler's Grove regular who influenced Palmer was smooth fiddling Kentuckian J. P. Fraley. "When I was introduced to Fiddler's Grove, which was my first baptism into the communal music of western North Carolina and Kentucky, contest fiddling is what I heard and what I was drawn to."

Palmer went back home to the Philadelphia area after college, though she returned to Union Grove regularly—winning the twin fiddle championships with George Huhn in 1980 and 1981, and with Fritz Wisdom in 1983 and 1984. In Philadelphia, she was "playing music every night of the week. I played at the Tuesday night square dance [a famous event at the International House in University City], at the Commodore Barry Club [Philadelphia's Irish community center], and at the Summit church"—all hotbeds of traditional music in Philadelphia.

Paul and Margaret Sidlick were musical omnivores from the start, attending folk music festivals, and

eventually focusing on old-time music. They have played in combination with a number of fine Philadelphia area musicians over the years. From the mid-80s through the 90s, Paul and Margaret also played in the County 502 String Band, with Tim Brown, fiddler Sue Shumaker, and bassists Rich McKenzie and (later) Doug Odell. In 2003, young fiddler Matt Brown enlisted Paul to play in the Rusty Beaus, an energetic old-time concert and dance band that includes Tim Brown, Rusty Neithammer, and sometimes Sara Slaughter. Paul has also been playing recently with fid-

studies the early recordings: "The guitar playing on almost half of the old-time recordings is more of a straight, flat strum with no boom-chuck. If you listen closely, often a jazz or swing back-up—what I would call a sock rhythm—is what they're approaching, so that's what I do on rag tunes like 'Wink the Other Eye' and 'Going to Jail.'"

Greg's friend Beth Hartness points out that "The Run of the Mill gang can always be counted on to provide music that is tasteful, intricate and intriguing." As a guitarist who also has a strong and unusual style, Beth finds Greg Loux "an absolute delight to play with and to learn from. His take on tunes and chords and his Byzantine, double-picking style are always unique, something I look forward to, and definitely not run of the mill!"

Palmer and Greg married in 1983 and the Run of the Mill String Band solidified as the trio of Palmer and Greg Loux and Paul Sidlick. An exception was that

when Paul couldn't make the trip, North Carolina banjoist Greg O'Steen played with them. Margaret Sidlick joined the Run of the Mill String Band on banjo uke from about 1987 to 1998, a period of tremendous activity for the band. Bassist Tom Schaffer joined the group a year later. This version of the group plays regularly at concerts, dances, and festivals, including the Coatesville Celebration of Old Time Music and Dance, an annual event sponsored by the city's Cultural Society.

Tom Schaffer, who plays guitar, bass and fiddle, has been part of the



*The Run of the Mill String Band L-R: Greg Loux, Palmer Loux, Paul Sidlick, and Tom Schaffer.*

dlar and tunesmith Jane Rothfield.

Though Greg Loux had also had the requisite childhood piano lessons, he was more strongly drawn to the guitar, obtaining his first one around age 12. Today, Greg's guitar playing is easily recognizable. Though he worked hard to master the boom-chuck rhythm he heard on early country records, he went on to develop a unique, galloping style of playing that incorporates more complex rhythms. He's also experimented with a cross-picking style inspired by George Shuffler, long-time band mate of the famous Stanley Brothers. And he



J.P. Fraley and Palmer share a tune with Will Keys at Fiddler's Grove in the 1980s.

Philadelphia old-time scene since the early 1970s. He bows as well as plucks his bass, and brings a rich, full bottom end that envelops the trio's sound. "He comes off as a very unassuming person, but he has a definite opinion about what he wants to hear, and he won't hesitate to make a suggestion," laughs Palmer. Paul observes that Tom "is a chordal minimalist," and that, as a physics teacher, "he's got that analytical thing going. And having his tonal range with the bass makes it that much easier to sing. [Playing with him] has been a lot of fun."

Though Tom has been playing old-time music for many decades, he confesses to one major aberration: "There lurks a 1969 United Artists release by a psychedelic/ metal power trio called Thunder and Roses, which went quickly to oblivion, except for one original song which was later covered by Nirvana and just recently resurfaced in their big box set." Tom's checkered past also includes a stint with The Munchkins, "a very turbulent outfit, but we did have a lot of contact with Todd Rundgren, who stole our drummer at one point, and had the honor of opening for such

greats as Jay and the Techniques and even The 1910 Fruit Gum Company."

Despite this brush with notoriety, Tom has kept a low but steady profile in old-time music. "There have been some forays into organized banddom: playing guitar in another power trio, the Sly Dogs, alongside Mark Simos and Michael Gallagher, and as part of The Amazing Rhythm Kings with Bob Carlin, Ernest Tedino and Sol Kohen," he admits. Tom has also played with The Hix, The Sandia Hots, and The Piedmont Pepsteppers. Recently retired from many years of teaching physics, Tom now happily finds more time for music.

Tom's ideas add important ingredients to the sound of the band. Palmer notes that the bass changes their dynamics: "It doesn't really change the timing, but we've added this neat, funky dimension of the bowed bass with some of the rags. He's really willing to step out on a limb and try something new." Greg agrees, adding that Tom's bass allows him to "back off and focus more on the rhythm," and he feels that they have not begun to scratch the surface of what Tom offers the band. "His bowed bass playing leads us to switch back to the banjo-guitar and the National steel

guitar. That bowed bass just makes it so old sounding. On the 'Georgia Stomp' it's just so cool."

### Following Taproots

The band members claim many musical heroes, including Buddy Thomas, Luther Davis, the Delmore Brothers, Ed Haley, Wayne Perry, Doc Roberts, and John Salyer. Their closest tune-swapping connections are their Pennsylvania pals, but they also love to meet up with friends of all ages from North Carolina to hear what they've been playing.

Greg sees generosity and sharing as a major part of the older tradition and feels it is now up to them to be just as generous to the younger players. He also advocates originality: "I encourage learning guitar players to strive to develop their own dynamic, discernible style, as opposed to a generic approach, and to match the intensity of the fiddle and banjo with a guitar style as unique and identifiable as the other instruments."

When asked about mentors, Paul lists older players like Marvin Gaster and Tony Ellis, but also peers Rusty Neithammer, Frank Scott, Walt Koken, and Pete Peterson, and Bertram Levy's recording *That Old Gut Feeling*. "The thing about the banjo is that no two people play really alike," he claims. "It's just this mishmash coming at me from all directions, and some things come out in my playing."

Greg says that though he feels fortunate to have heard J.P. Fraley, Byard Ray, and Tommy Jarrell, he has also been inspired by his contemporaries. "When we hear what they're learning, what's the first thing we do? We go and listen to their source to try to hear what moved them to learn it so we can pick up on that same passion." Greg continues. "We wouldn't have known about Arthur Smith without Bill Christopherson, or Edden Hammons without Bertram Levy as our stepping stones. It's important to go after the source but so important

to recognize who gave you the spark that leads you back.”

### Collective Gut Feeling

Palmer stresses the importance of interactive learning in traditional music. “No one learns to play this music alone, and there is no way of getting better if you don’t listen to and play with others. When I’m in a jam that’s cooking and we’re listening to each other and I’m hearing new things that I’ve never heard before, I’m learning.”

A true calling for this band has been playing for dancers. Over the years they’ve played for dozens of dances in the mid-Atlantic region, and their concerts still feature a healthy helping of dance tunes. “We basically identify ourselves as a dance band, but we also work our butts off to put together an interesting concert, which is not just dance music,” said Greg. Palmer continues: “We’re driven toward a program that’s kind of an emotional roller coaster. We’ll do a rag, then a hot old-time tune, then a waltz, then a funny song, then maybe a ballad.”

Though Palmer can be an energetic fiddler on the fast tunes and rags, waltzes are a band specialty. Paul claims, “that’s because we have the best waltz fiddler ever.” Adds Tom, “I was always of the opinion that old-time music should be kind of rough and rowdy, not too pretty; but on the waltzes, Palmer does such a smooth job that I feel compelled to make them as pretty as possible, and I confess I’m enjoying that.” Banjoist Paul also manages some uncommonly masterful waltz accompaniment on tunes such as “The Cherry Blossom Waltz,” and “The Italian Waltz,” from Marvin Gaster.

Their work is marked by unconventional approaches with a constant nod to the traditions of the old southern string bands, the long-departed fiddle masters, and the pioneers of American country and blues music. “I

think of old-time music as a living, breathing fine art form that’s passed person to person,” said Palmer. “The thing that was so attractive to me as a fiddle player, and as somebody who played written orchestral music for so many years, is that you could take a tune and put your own personal stamp on it, your own personal twist or feel, and not be wrong as long as you’re true to the melody and preserving the essence of the tune.”

Their choice of instruments is up for grabs every time they acquire a new tune, and they pay attention to the early recordings. “We’ve been lucky to come across some unique instruments,” said Margaret Sidlick. “Some of them fell in our lap; some of them we searched for.” Greg and Paul share an affinity for the banjo-hybrid family of instruments, including the banjo-guitar, banjo-uke and banjo-mandolin. They often pack the resonator guitar and mandolin as they head out to a concert or dance. “How many instruments do we want to take to this gig?” asks Palmer. “Six or 16?” It all depends on the length of performance and the tunes they might want to play.

Regarding arrangements, Palmer says she often learns tunes from banjo players, and resetting them on the fiddle is no small challenge. “If Paul calls me and says, ‘listen to this,’ I’m going to learn it because I want to play it with him. Paul said he really wanted to do ‘The Ohio Waltz,’ from Tony Ellis. He played it for me and I couldn’t pick it up just jamming it, so I went back to what Tony was doing on his CD and I adapted it to what I thought the fiddle might do. Then I called Paul’s answering machine because I knew he was at work, and I said, ‘I just want you to hear what I’ve been doing today.’”

While some tunes don’t make the cut, others have stood the test of time. As Paul points out, “there’s also this core of [dance] tunes that we’ve been playing since the beginning, like

‘Gray Eagle’ and ‘Rachel,’ that never go out of style for us.”

### The “Mid-Career High”

The Run of the Mill String Band really hit its stride around 1992 and 1993. Several years of playing together, sharing ideas, and exploring were about to pay off. “It was a time period when all these things were happening. We won at Fiddler’s Grove, made our first recording, played Brandywine, and went to Russia,” said Paul in retrospective amazement.

“I remember at Brandywine in 1992 doing the fiddle workshop with Palmer and Sue Shumaker, Pete Sutherland and Pat Conte,” Greg recalls. “John Lupton introduced us, and I will never forget his introduction: ‘They’re going off to Russia!’ That was our mid-career high.” “By the time we got asked to play there [at Brandywine], you can imagine how blown away we were,” Paul declared. “Those festivals were a huge influence on us because we went to all of them. I wouldn’t be playing if it weren’t for them.”

Then it was off to Eastern Europe on a whirlwind summer tour that would take them from St. Petersburg to Vienna, with several stops in between. There they introduced American old-time music to new audiences in five major cities. They performed in primarily in churches, but also in parks in Czechoslovakia, airports in Austria, and even the middle of Red Square in Moscow. “It really was the trip of a lifetime,” said Margaret.

“When we won at Fiddler’s Grove in 1993 it was the big band, with Sue Shumaker, Greg O’Steen, Greg, me, Paul, and Palmer,” said Margaret. After several years of competing, “we had six people and we won the senior old-time band contest.” Paul also won a ribbon in the banjo contest, and Palmer and Sue Shumaker won the twin fiddle contest for the second consecutive year.

After this intense period they decided it was time for a recording. To record the self-produced *Along the Way*, Paul recalls that “we used a studio in Quakertown [Pennsylvania], which was a little crazy, because to [engineer and co-producer] Pete Davis this was all very unique and exotic. . . . But he was very good, very sensitive to the music. . . . We worked up a lot of material so we were very comfortable.” He also notes, “I can’t believe we played that fast. I actually think it’s pretty hot, although a bit frantic, but we don’t play that fast anymore.”

Two months later they gave a concert set in a prime time slot at the Brandywine Mountain Music Convention, where they had been hearing their heroes for 20 years. “I was so elated,” said Palmer. “We knew it



L-R: Paul, Margaret, Palmer, Greg in front of St. Basil's Cathedral, Moscow, in 1993.

was going to be hot and crazy, but we were really psyched. That was really a high point for us in our lives.” Shortly thereafter, the quartet’s music appeared on *The Appalachian String Band Music Festival*, a compilation of recordings from the annual gathering at Clifftop, West Virginia.

As she continued to win ribbons at Fiddler’s Grove, Palmer appeared on a series of festival LPs. On the 1982 album, backed by Greg Loux, she plays a breakneck “Sidewinder” (later determined to be “Snakewinder”). The 70th Anniversary CD (from 1994) features a swinging twin fiddle version of “Red Bird” played by blue ribbon winners Palmer Loux and Sue Shumaker, and another features Run of the Mill playing a rousing version of “Pike’s Peak.”

The band’s second recording, 1998’s aptly titled *In Good Company* represented a new approach. In the spring of 1997 Palmer and Greg Loux gathered together their closest musical comrades (including Paul Sidlick, of course) for a set of easy rolling sessions at their home in Havertown, PA. At the controls was Ray Alden, a field recording pro with dozens of old-time music projects to his credit.

“The second recording project, working with Ray Alden, was for me an epiphany,” said Greg. “He had a very well-formed opinion of the way to record, and to me that removed all of the technical debate and tension and stress so that we could just play. The living room became our recording studio, and it was all very natural and easy. Ray has such an amazing ear, and he understands acoustics.” County Sales chose the 22-track project as their “Second Best Old Time Music (New Recording) of 1998.”

### The Philadelphia Old-Time Music Community

The vibrancy of the old-time music community in the Philadelphia area is evident in the number of parties and

jam sessions. Fortunately, unlike many other forms, “this music was made for small groups. It’s very social and very friendly,” says Palmer. Area folks like Clare Milliner and Walt Koken host regular gatherings in Avondale, Chester County. Carl Baron and Beverly Smith host a monthly jam in the city’s Chestnut Hill section, and other jams convene regularly at various locations in and around Philadelphia. And Paul and Margaret Sidlick have hosted a regular jam for several years at their home in Malvern. These gatherings regularly draw musicians from Washington, D.C. to upstate New York and everywhere in between. The attraction is a steady source of friendship, feasting and fiddle tunes, where novice players can rub knees with the most talented bowers and thumpers in the region. With so much good food at the potluck parties it’s a wonder much music is made, but it’s not uncommon for six or seven different jams to be ongoing in different rooms—sometimes even in a closet!

“This is a phenomenal old-time scene in Philadelphia,” agrees Greg. Old-time music concerts featuring bands from outside the region regularly draw large audiences. Even the Philadelphia Folksong Society, the region’s folk music institution, occasionally hires old-time bands to play at its annual Folk Festival. Run of the Mill appeared at the 2003 festival, on the main stage and in a workshop session with progressive banjo player Alison Brown. Still, it’s sometimes an uphill battle for old-time artists to catch the attention of many area folk promoters who favor contemporary singer-songwriters.

Though that overall trend may be disheartening to many old-time musicians, a handful of local nonprofits are preserving and perpetuating traditional music through public performance. Frank Dalton hosts a staunchly traditional Irish music series in Coatesville, Pennsylvania in addition to his work with the Philadelphia

Ceili Group's concert series in the Mt. Airy neighborhood. The Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music continue their long-running concert series and annual Delaware Valley Bluegrass Festival, and a new group called Low Key Productions presents area concerts by old-time musicians from West Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky.

In January 2005 the Run of the Mill String Band gathered for a new project, *Steal Aboard*. This time out they chose to work with noted jazz and classical music producer Rick Hall and his ace engineer Chris Gately. The entire process involved only two days of recording and a few follow-up mixing sessions. The result is a collection of 21 tunes that demonstrates how well this quartet's nimble yet natural sound has been sharpened and intensified by 25 years of interplay. The fact that the CD has been so well received is great news for Hall's fledgling Stylograph label, based out of his studio in Conshohocken, just west of Philadelphia.

### The Future

"Bands are like marriages. Some of them last, some of them don't," says Margaret. "No matter what, we all grow and change, but we're all still playing music, and we're all still friends. We listen to other types of music, even play other types of music, but old-time is what we all come back to. It's a common interest that holds us all together and we've all become friends because of it. It's obviously a commitment in everybody's lives."

Palmer continues: "We've all been through hard times personally and professionally, and we've been there for each other because this is an extension of our family. We feel lucky." She appreciates that despite their trips South for inspiration, "we've gotten so much mileage and support and love from the people so close to home. It's really great and there can

never be enough thanks in that regard."

Above all, these players delight in sharing tunes, comparing notes, and trading ideas with friends and fellow musicians. Whether you're an old friend or a curious stranger stumbling upon one of their sessions, they're completely welcoming, engaging, and excited to show you the latest tune that trips their trigger. Most of all, they want to hear what you can do with it.

Palmer concludes, "The elements we're taking are the love, the quality, and the truth in representing what we've heard. What we bring to the music is how we're feeling it at the time, so our music is always evolving and changing. We're enjoying this ride together, knowing the best is yet to come." ■

*Todd Denton lives in Thornton, Pennsylvania. He serves on the board of the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music.*

### Run of the Mill String Band Discography

June 1993: *Along the Way*, Run of the Mill String Band, self-produced, cassette  
 August 1994: *A Tribute to the Appalachian String Band Festival*, Clifftop, WV, Various Artists, Chubby Dragon CD1001  
 January 1998: *In Good Company*, Palmer and Greg Loux, Chubby Dragon CD1004  
 July 2005: *Steal Aboard*, Run of the Mill String Band, Stylograph STY44531



*Greg, Palmer and Paul at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, 2003.*