

# Jack Tuttle: Teacher Man

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By: Shelby C. Berry

Multi-instrumentalist Jack Tuttle was reared in a musical family in rural Illinois, and his love for music started at the early age of five. After seven years of playing the guitar, Jack decided to pick up the banjo after hearing his father play, and his world changed for the better. He eventually picked up the mandolin and fiddle before he began teaching music full-time at Gryphon Stringed Instruments in Palo Alto, California in 1979.

Jack teaches private lessons and classes in fiddle, mandolin, banjo, guitar, string bass, and bluegrass vocals. For three decades, his bluegrass jam classes have been a mainstay at Gryphon Stringed Instruments. Spanning thirty years, he taught thousands of students who became top musicians and major talents in the Bay Area and other parts of the country as well.

He has also taught at the Sore Fingers Summer Schools in the UK, the Walker Creek Music Camp, the California Coast Music Camp (CCMC), the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, and the Northern Bluegrass Circle Workshop in Canada.

Jack's teaching focuses on the technical aspect of bluegrass music, and he has developed lesson programs that build upon that. Above all, Jack's primary goal is to help his students to develop total musicianship, getting them to the point where they can think for themselves on their instrument.

Due to the nature of our world with COVID-19, Jack was forced to cancel this year's spring bluegrass jam classes and all the camps where he was scheduled to teach. However, this has given

his lessons a new focus – adapting to a virtual world.

Jack's in-depth website includes information about lessons and classes, printed music, practicing tips and advice, bluegrass history, and so much more. His nationally recognized bluegrass curriculum, including twelve instructional books, has been digitized as well as pre-made audio for students that exists on his website.

Jack Tuttle isn't just known for his teaching, having performed at many notable events over the years such as A Prairie Home Companion, Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, Strawberry Music Festival, and MerleFest.

He has even been a staple every year at the prestigious CBA Music Camp in Grass Valley, one of the largest bluegrass camps in the country. In 2012, 2016, and 2017, Jack won the Northern California Bluegrass Society's Bluegrass Fiddler of the Year Award. In 2007, he was presented with the California Bluegrass Association's prestigious Lifetime Membership Award, and in 2014, he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Northern California Bluegrass Society.



### **Jack and Molly Tuttle**

But aside from all his success as a musician and a teacher, perhaps Jack's greatest achievement in music is his children.

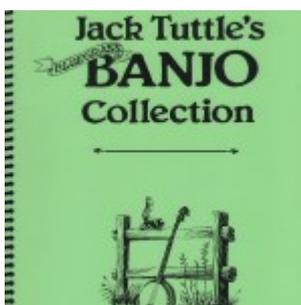
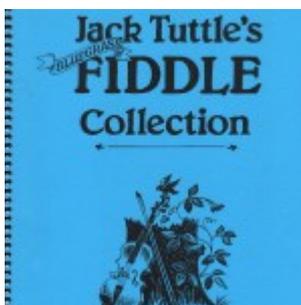
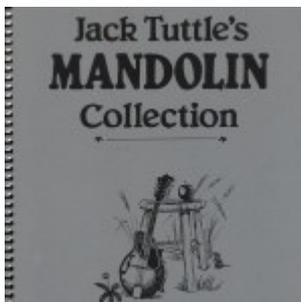
Jack taught his children – Molly, Sullivan, and Michael – who all went on to become nationally recognized bluegrass

musicians. Molly became the 2017 and 2018 Bluegrass Guitar Player of the Year at the IBMA Awards, the first woman to ever win this award. She was also voted Instrumentalist of the Year by the Americana Music Association.

In 2019, Jack's son Sullivan received second place at the National Flatpicking Championships in Winfield, Kansas. The Tuttle kids and Jack have performed together throughout the country as well as Europe and Canada.

In this feature, Jack shares his career as a teacher and as a father in a performing family.

<https://youtu.be/UH74ca9Az1w>



# A Bluegrass Standard Interview

***The Bluegrass Standard: You were raised in a bluegrass family. Tell us your story.***

Jack Tuttle: My dad played guitar when I was really little. He would play Hank Williams and show me the chords. At some point along the way around 8 years old, my dad learned the banjo. So, I grew up hearing bluegrass and old country – and eventually learned the banjo. It wasn't until I was about 17 that I went to my first bluegrass festival, and that's when I really got the bug. My sister went too! It was a small festival, but I came back totally jazzed about what we heard. My sister got a mandolin, and I took to the mandolin too. My dad decided we needed a string bass in the house, and my sister started playing that. We got some guys in town and had a small (sort of) family band that played around town. When I went to college and graduated, I found teaching. I moved to California after graduating where I knew there was a strong acoustic music presence. I found Gryphon String Instruments, and they were looking for a banjo teacher. At that point, I was playing mostly mandolin, but I started teaching jam classes. We actually got pretty big into doing that before anyone was.

***BGS: What inspired you?***

JT: I think going to that bluegrass festival and the organic nature of the music happening. I grew up around it, but I really only knew it from the records. Seeing it live and hearing it live was something different. I loved hearing the harmonies under the trees. I got into the lonesome singing from people like Ralph Stanley. I just took it all in. We were seeing greats like Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley playing live and learning from them. It really was the whole package.

***BGS: What experience has been the most rewarding?***

JT: Getting my kids into the music would be a pretty big highlight.

**BGS: Tell us one of your favorite places to perform.**

JT: Boy, if I had to pick one, I'd say A Prairie Home Companion that Molly and I played on. Before it was popular, I was listening to A Prairie Home Companion. That spot was really fun. Maybe playing the Strawberry Music Fest with my kids was high on the list too!

**BGS: What one word describes your music?**

JT: Authenticity, rooted in the tradition of music. A sound rooted in the early stuff, the intensity that bluegrass has. Even part of it is the culture of the early lyrics of rural life. It all rolls into one.

**BGS: What does it mean to you knowing your children love music as much as you do?**

JT: It's a nice connection that we have. We talk music, and it unites us even more. It's nice to be a part of their music – to help with musical notes with Molly. It's a rewarding experience.

**BGS: What drove you into musical education, specifically, instructional books, lessons, and seminars.**

JT: It's a funny thing. It was driven by putting so much materials on paper with all the instruments. I compiled them, and it was about 900 papers of materials. It was crazy and so hard to organize, so I put them in books. It improved my teaching. I needed a system that was laid out in book form. I honestly was driven by the insanity of filing music! I have so much written material, so some think I'm a written music guy, but I'm all about learning music by ear and improvising.

**BGS: What is your favorite instrument to teach and your favorite part of teaching overall?**

JT: Right now, I enjoy the guitar. Once everything went online, I got a lot of people from all over that wanted to learn to play guitar. Very few people play bluegrass rhythm guitar correctly because you can make so much improvement with students when demonstrating the bluegrass strum. Overall, I love the connection with students. I teach a lot of adults and kids too. With the jam session classes over the years, it becomes a circle of friends. At bluegrass festivals, my students are all over. I enjoy the social aspect, and bluegrass is very social. It's all part of the same thing, and I enjoy that!

***BGS: What last message do you have for readers, including your students and fans?***

JT: Just that I appreciate the enthusiasm from the people that support me – with gigs and lessons. Bluegrass is such a supportive community. I appreciate every bit and thank you for showing up.

If you are interested in lessons from Jack or just want to learn more from his vast musical knowledge, visit [www.jacktuttle.com](http://www.jacktuttle.com).