

The Hi-Ho Lounge: Bluegrass in the Big Easy

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by Meghan Holmes

On a recent Monday night in New Orleans, around half a dozen masked musicians sit in a circle inside the Hi-Ho Lounge. “Do y’all know ‘Take this Hammer?’” asks a banjo player, already plucking his strings. A short run-through later, and another banjo, guitar, and accordion have joined in, with an increasingly steady harmony rising over the hum of a food truck outside.

It’s the Bluegrass Pickin’ Party – a weekly gathering of local and often also traveling musicians that’s been held at the Hi-Ho since 2007, though its origins go back further, according to current organizer Tucker Baker.

“I’ve been involved for the past seven years or so, after finding the jam while I was studying at Tulane and doing a music culture project on the banjo. Before Katrina, there was a bluegrass jam at Liuzza’s by the Track on Thursday nights that started in the late 90s,” Baker said.

Most Hi-Ho jam sessions feature at least one bass, mandolin, fiddle, and banjo, though the pandemic has impacted how many performers can participate.

For a while, the group was live streaming the jam from inside the venue, which “felt sort of like being with my friends in a speakeasy,” Baker said.

Regular group members include jam founder Geoff Coates, Mark Andrews, Victoria Coy, Pat "The Bill Monroe of the Hi-Ho" Flory, and many others.

"We want a variety while also aiming to have traditional bluegrass vibes, as well as old-time country that is jammable," Baker said. "Hank Williams, Sr. is all right by us, like 'Louisiana Hayride' type of country music. Pat (Flory) will do Jimmy Martin's 'One Woman Man,' and things like that. We have people that bring dobroes, lap steels, and harmonicas, and before COVID turned things upside down, part of my job was calling people and figuring out who was bringing what and working out the instruments."

MONDAYS AT THE HI-HO

8PM: BLUEGRASS
PICKIN' PARTY

10PM: YES MA'AM

\$2 RED
BEANS
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The pickin' party at the Hi-Ho forms part of a larger bluegrass scene in New Orleans that might initially seem incongruous given the city's reputation as the birthplace of blues and jazz.

Baker also performs with the Monday Night String Band (with John Noble, Julie Pfeffer, Ben Russell, Gene Smith, and Scott Stobbe), while other local groups The Tanglers (Dylan Williams, Graham Robinson, Harry Hardin, Jacob Tanner, Matt Rota, and Craig Alexander) and Sweet Olive String Band (Pat Flory, Mike Kerwin, Rob Schafer, and Tina Forsyth) also have

ties to the Hi-Ho jam.

One of the city's longest-running bluegrass groups is Hazel and the Delta Ramblers, fronted by New Orleans bluegrass legend Hazel Schlueter (with Scott Kropog, Russ Vandyke, and Larry Schlueter). The group boasts a 35-year run at Jazz Fest, and Hazel has hosted an old-time country and bluegrass show on New Orleans' local music-only public radio station WWOZ since the station's inception in 1980, which is currently aired on Sundays.

"Yeah, there are definitely a good number of bluegrass musicians down here," Baker said. "There's a history that goes back, and it's not really that surprising, because for all intents and purposes bluegrass is rural white jazz. Somebody takes the lead, and you sing a verse, then sing a chorus. They aren't that disparate in my mind."

Older styles of country music don't feature breaks as prominently as bluegrass – something integral to the genre that arises from jazz and blues influences. Solos are an important part of the bluegrass sound, and early pioneers in the genre like Bill Monroe heard jazz in cities and integrated elements into rural white music. Church songs and phrasing are also commonly heard in country, bluegrass, jazz, and the blues – something clearly on display at a recent Hi-Ho jam when "I Saw the Light," "This Train is Bound for Glory," and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" all made an appearance.

"We know it was widely accepted that Bill Monroe took a lot of elements of jazz structure and integrated them into bluegrass after spending time in Chicago," Baker said. "We haven't found the footnote yet, but Pat (Flory) and I are convinced he also made a trip to New Orleans and listened to the horn players."

The Hi-Ho jam continues, with recently implemented city-wide guidelines requiring masking as well as proof of vaccination

or a recent negative test result to enter venues ensuring safety, and Baker remains committed to the event's future on the other side of the pandemic.

"We've just been trying to find some way to slog through this since bars closed a year and a half ago. This event has been happening for decades and it's tough to imagine it ending. We went through a period where we didn't have it when things first shut down, and after being able to see everyone when we came back, we will definitely find a way to keep it going," he said.

