

Patuxent Music

By Bob Allen



Accordion, Go to Jail. That's the law!" (Mindte, as a kid, actually started out on accordion, but he assures me it was not fear of imprisonment that inspired him to switch to mandolin early on.)

Jokes and cartoons aside, a lot of serious business and great music has gone down here within the walls of Patuxent Studios in recent years. Thus far, the company's biggest commercial home run and its first entry in the bluegrass record charts came with the 2010 release of *Take Off*, the debut album by Darren Beachley & Legends of the Potomac. The band's first release reached the number 11 spot.

Legends of the Potomac (no longer active) was one of bluegrass's most recent super-group configurations. It included resonator guitar maestro Mike Auldridge and bassist Tom Gray (both distinguished alumni of the Seldom Scene), along with banjo player Mark Delaney (formerly of the Country Gentlemen), mandolin-player Norman Wright (who served in the Bluegrass Cardinals and the Country Gentlemen), and lead singer/guitarist Darren Beachley (an alumnus of Doyle Lawson's Quicksilver). One track on *Take Off*, called "Tall Weeds And Rust," features a guest vocal by country legend

Tom T. Hall, who also co-wrote the song with his wife Dixie.

Patuxent Music had another big moment in 2010 when Mindte coaxed three members of the legendary Stoneman family—sisters Donna, Roni, and Patsy—back into the studio to record the album, *Patsy, Donna and Roni*.

Patuxent's ever-expanding catalogue also includes, among its many other titles, a collaboration by Eddie and Martha Adcock and Tom Gray called *Many A Mile* and, a recent CD by Japanese bluegrass banjo maestro Akira Otsuka titled *First Tear*. Additional titles include several releases by veteran Frank Wakefield, including *A Tribute To Bill Monroe*; the solo release *Sidecar* by Potomac Legends banjoman Mark Delaney; *Lonesome Heavy Heart* by the Baker Boys; *Duets*, Mindte's own collaboration with guitarist Jim Barnett; Gary Ferguson's *Live At Podunk*, and reissues of a trio of classic Buzz Busby albums. Others include several albums by ace guitarist Jordan Tice and three releases by Mindte's own band, the Patuxent Partners.

Recently, Danny Paisley recorded his first album for Patuxent at Mindte's

From the outside, Patuxent Studios, located in a drab industrial park across some railroad tracks and a few blocks away from Rockville, Md.'s, congested main drag, looks little different from the surrounding warehouses, car lots, floor care companies, and auto repair centers. But step inside the studio, and you enter a different world. The dimly lit suite of rooms includes a reception area and several separate spaces used for recording. Throughout, the studio has the comfortable atmosphere of an old-time music lover's well-appointed club basement.

"People who are not professional musicians are nervous when they record, not only about giving a good performance, but also because the clock is ticking," said Patuxent Music owner and resident engineer/producer Tom Mindte, who has recorded his share of professionals and amateurs alike in his state-of-the-art facility. "So you need something that's really comfortable."

The walls of Mindte's studio are adorned with vintage musical instruments, bluegrass and country concert posters of yesteryear, and portraits of American musical greats such as Duke Ellington, Bill Monroe, Donna Stoneman, and, of course, Buzz Busby, the man who inspired Mindte as a young mandolin player. Even the bathroom walls are decorated with photos, cartoons, and other quirky memorabilia. There's a hand-made poster advertising a long-ago appearance by Busby at the *Louisiana Hayride*, a blow-up of an old newspaper article with the headline: "Woman Killed With Banjo," and a plaque that sternly warns: "Play an



Tom Mindte in the control room

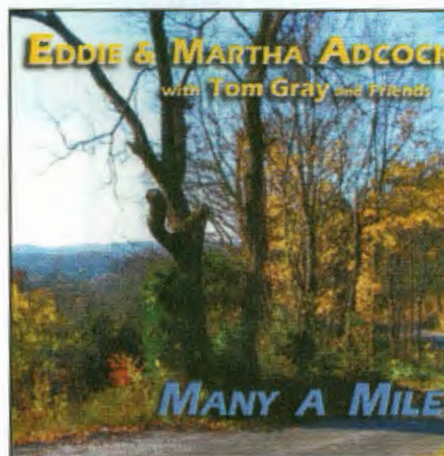
suburban Maryland studio and it will be released under the Patuxent imprimatur later this year. Also nearing release is a banjo album featuring Bill Emerson, Mark Delaney, Eddie Adcock, Don Bryant, Mark Schatz, Mike Munford, Chris Warner, and a host of other banjo masters. "There's no working title yet," Tom Mindte, 55, the Rockville-native musician who founded and owns Patuxent Music, said of the banjo opus, also set for release later this year. "But there's an old Stonemans album that has a picture of the Stonemans standing on Pennsylvania Avenue by the Old Post Office Pavilion, and you can see the Nation's Capital in the background. We may try to recreate that photo for the cover by doing a photo shoot at the same location."

Mindte is also excited by a forthcoming album that he has been working on with Corey Pyatt, who he describes as an "awesome 16-year-old mandolin player who plays with Kenny and Amanda Smith. We recorded his album last summer, but I'm still waiting on a couple of tracks that are being recorded in Nashville. We should have that out pretty soon, too."

Mindte says Patuxent Records has managed to grow from its very humble beginnings by slowly but steadily carving a niche in the bluegrass record industry. "I'm working with a lot of up-and-coming artists as well as artists like Frank Wakefield who have had long, successful careers, but aren't playing as much these days, but are still great," said Mindte, referring to the celebrated mandolinist who worked with Jimmy Martin, Ralph Stanley, and Red Allen. "Frank has done four albums with me. With these artists, I have a little tighter budget to work with," he added, "but I still have to get the same quality in the sound and the graphics and everything. Having my own studio helps with the budget a lot, but I can't afford the big ads in the music magazines and all that."

Mindte recalls that his label, which in the past few years has become an emerging player in the bluegrass mainstream, was born of necessity; it started small and grew organically. When he was 19 or 20 years old, Mindte was playing mandolin with his first band, the Montgomery County Ramblers, and wanted to record them. So he bought a reel-to-reel tape recorder, which at the time was the best home recording technology available. "Before I got a

chance to record my band, another guy in this area found out I had this recorder and he wanted me to record a demo for him," Mindte recalled. "I just used the PA system I used for my band and recorded him and mixed him and his band down to two tracks. He made five hundred cassette copies and gave 'em away as demos. It had my name on it, and it sounded pretty good, so a few people started calling me. I



recorded them, too, and then I finally recorded my band."

By this time, Mindte, who has long since made the switch to the digital format and Pro Tools 10, had graduated to a more sophisticated eight-track analogue system. "I started recording across the street from here, in a room in the warehouse

where my family's air conditioning business used to be," he recalled. "But I never did get a satisfactory recording of my band, that I was happy using that setup."

The turning point, and the birth of Patuxent Records, came in the mid-1990s when Mindte's friend Joe Meadows, the late, great fiddle player who played with both Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys and the Stanley Brothers, landed a contract with a small record label and hired Mindte to engineer and produce a record. By then, Mindte had moved his studios across the street to its present location, in an industrial building that, at the time, was a storage facility for the family business. "I started out recording in the room that we now use for drums, or sometimes for vocals if the singer is someone like Danny Paisley, who has a really powerful voice that needs to be isolated," Mindte said, as he sat at the studio console and pointed over his shoulder at the small room. "By then, I had an eight-track digital TASCAM D-88 that's still in the rack over there." Mindte finished the record for Meadows just in time for the little independent label that had commissioned it to go bust and leave Mindte and Meadows holding the bag. "That's when I decided to put the record out myself," Mindte added.

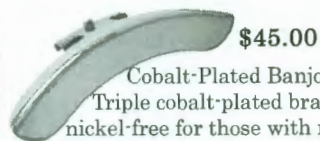
Mindte insists he more or less learned the record business by the seat of his pants, one step at a time. "Most of it I learned just by going to IBMA conventions and being a fly on the wall at the forums they have for record labels. I found out that in bluegrass, a big chunk of record sales comes from bands selling their records at their gigs," he added. "That means the bigger companies have to make sure their artists have a busy schedule, with lots of gigs, because those companies are going to spend a lot of money making the record and have to make sure that artists sell a lot of records so the label gets its money back."

In short, Mindte took another approach: working fast and smart on a shoestring budget. He says that's usually easy to do when working with studio-savvy veterans like Danny Paisley or Legends of the Potomac. "The main thing is that those guys, like Mike Auldridge, they've recorded a hundred times," he said. "So you just ask them what they normally do in the studio; you don't tell them what to do. In Mike's case, he told me, 'Well, I have these mics I've used for years; is it okay to use them?' And I said sure. So we'll set it



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up and try different things and move things around, and eventually he'll say, 'That's it, that's my sound!'

"You don't ever just say, 'This is the setup for guitar,'" he added emphatically. "That doesn't work, because every instrument and every player is different. You've got to take the approach of, 'Let's try this.' Then you listen and maybe think, 'No, that doesn't sound like him.' So you move a mike or adjust something until you've got the sound you want."

Mindte recalls when Jordan Tice first came to Patuxent at age 16, he was already a stellar guitarist, but very green as a recording artist. "I just told him to name a guitar player he liked, and he named a few. One of them was Bryan Sutton," Mindte said. "So I suggested he call Bryan and ask him what he does (in the studio). That's the nice thing about bluegrass, that you can just call people like Bryan. And Bryan told us how he set up in the studio, and that's how we set Jordan up, and it worked pretty good."

Mindte's first love has always been bluegrass. His West Virginia-born grandfather was an old-time fiddler, and his parents and uncles were big bluegrass fans

with extensive record collections. As a child, they took him to festivals in Gettysburg and the Watermelon Park bluegrass festival, in Berryville, Va.

As a teenager, he haunted the Washington area bluegrass hotspots of that era, including the Red Fox Inn in Bethesda, Shakey's Pizza Parlor in Rockville, O'Brien's Barbecue in Bethesda and The Birchmere in Alexandria, Va., in its earliest years. "There was a lot of bluegrass in clubs around here when I was old enough to get out on my own," he recalled. "That was how I met a lot of really great musicians like Tom Knowles, Joe Meadows, Buzz Busby, and Lamar Grier and Porter Church (both of whom did stints in Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys), by just going and hangin' out."

Though when it comes to the economics of survival, you can't be a purist. In order to keep his studio going through thick and thin times, Mindte has recorded just about anyone and everyone, including local rap, go-go, rockabilly, and garage rock bands. "I've recorded just about anything you can think of," he said. "I'm usually the engineer; [musicians] sometimes bring their own producers. I haven't ever turned anything down."

Among the notables beyond the bluegrass realm who have recorded for Patuxent are jazz guitarist Larry Coryell and pianist John Colianni, a long-time member of the Les Paul Trio who has also backed jazz greats like Mel Torme and Lionel Hampton. Thus far, Patuxent Music has also benefited from a tendency among bluegrass musicians to label-hop fairly often—out of necessity as much as anything else. Fortunately for Mindte, quite a few have recently hopped over to Patuxent.

"Bluegrass musicians are living on the edge," he said. "I mean there is not much money in it; even the top bluegrass musicians are not making as much as the top country musicians. So you have to balance loyalty to a label with dollars and cents, because you are often just barely making it. That's why if some label comes along and gives you a better deal, you've gotta go with it," he added. "It's not a matter of being fickle or capricious or anything. It's just survival. They're doing what they've got to do."



Bob Allen is a contributing writer to Bluegrass Unlimited.

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