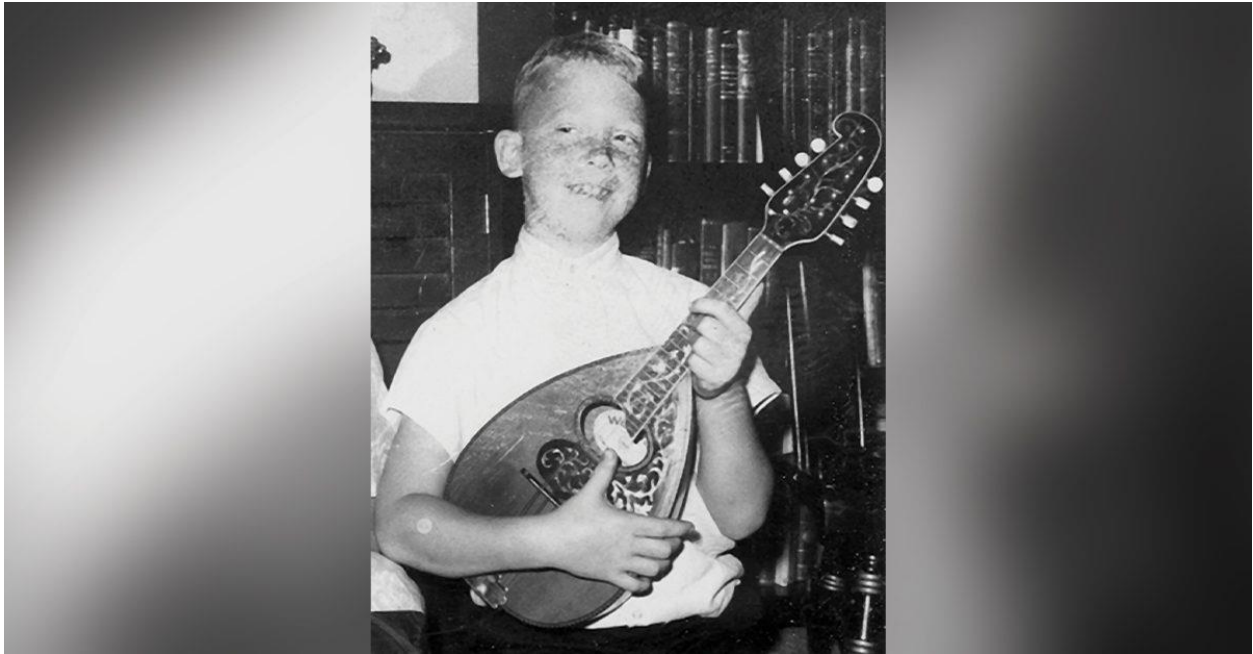


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Tom Mindte with his first mandolin (age 8)

Tom Mindte

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Bluegrass Musician And Recording Impresario

I have known Tom Mindte since the mid-1970s when he was a frequent patron of Shakey's Pizza Parlor in Rockville, MD. My band, Appalachian Reign, played there on Saturday nights and he was one of our biggest fans.

Tom grew up in a household that loved music. His Dad, Vance, was a heating and air conditioning contractor and when customers couldn't pay he would often barter. On one occasion he received an old crank-up Victrola full of 78rpm records. Most of them were German music but there were a few Hawaiian records mixed in. Tom relates, "They were really cool because they had a Hawaiian guitar which sounded like a Dobro. It was fascinating and I played those records over and over. When I was a little older, I searched for discs at thrift shops and record stores. I loved 78s because of their history and the way they spun around so fast." Over the years Tom amassed a huge collection of recordings which at one time totaled more than

50,000 78s, 45s and LPs. One of the rarest records he acquired was the picture record by Jimmie Rodgers issued shortly after his death in 1933.

His grandfather, Ed Hohmann, played fiddle in local string bands near his home in West Virginia and his grandmother, Margaret, played piano and organ in silent movie houses. Tom's dad acquired a mandolin through his bartering and hung it on the wall in the living room. "I've heard the Stonemans tell this same story but this actually happened. The mandolin was hanging on the wall and my Dad said not to touch it while he was at work. Of course, I couldn't leave it alone. He could tell that I'd been playing it but he didn't reprimand or scold me so it must have been all right. Somehow, I figured out how to tune it and was able to play melodies that I knew."

Tom's dad was a big bluegrass fan and often went to local pubs to hear Buzz Busby and Pete Pike, and the Country Gentlemen. There were many bluegrass albums in the house and Tom listened to them for hours at a time. When he was in fourth grade, his school introduced a music program and at a demonstration of the various instruments. Tom liked the accordion best because it sounded like a whole band. The family wanted him to learn a band instrument, so it was a hard sell. But he finally won them over and got his accordion, and this is how he learned what chords were and how they enhanced the music.

One evening while listening to a Country Gentlemen album he had an enlightening moment. "Okay, now I know what John Duffy is doing. He's playing chords on the mandolin. With my musical training I was able to figure out how to play some of the chords." Tom was still fairly serious about the accordion but when he got his driver's licence and was able to go to bluegrass festivals he saw how much fun people were having picking in the fields. That's when he got serious about playing the mandolin.



Buzz Busby and Tom Mindte in 1988

Tom found a few other people who wanted to play but none of them were willing to even try to sing. "So I had to do all of the singing and people seemed to like what they were hearing. At least they weren't covering their ears so I thought that perhaps I could be a singer. Then I started going to Shakey's Pizza Parlor near my home in Rockville, Maryland. On Saturday nights they had bluegrass and it was Appalachian Reign. Tom Knowles always had top-notch musicians in his band because many of the great pickers lived in the DC area. They had been with Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, Jimmy Martin and others. Some of the musicians that played there

were Lamar Grier on banjo, Joe Meadows on fiddle, Dave Auldridge on vocals, Buzz Busby on mandolin, Bill Torbert on mandolin, Dave Goldman on fiddle, Chris Warner on mandolin and banjo, Porter Church on banjo, Don Stover on banjo, and Dick Smith on banjo.

Most of these guys were in their 40s which seemed old to me and after playing a four hour gig they would play some more in the parking lot and I got to pick with these guys.” This is when Tom really started to figure things out because everyone was helpful and willing to teach. It was at these sessions that he learned how to play bluegrass rhythm on the mandolin. Shakey’s is where Tom first met Buzz Busby who would become a big influence on his life and musicianship. “I had met Buzz a few times and he knew my name, but I really got to know him when he was picking at Shakey’s.”

Dean Stoneman, who was a member of the famous Stoneman Family, had a gig at Larry’s Place in southern Maryland. “On one occasion Dean was not available and I was asked to fill in for him. Buzz and Lucky Saylor came into Larry’s and sat down at the table in front of the stage, literally right in front of me. And every time I took a break Buzz would point at me and laugh. This was aggravating and embarrassing. Here was a guy who was my musical hero pointing and laughing at me.” When the band went on break Tom approached Buzz and asked him why he was laughing and told him that he was doing the best he could. Buzz said “Aw, I didn’t mean no offense, son. I just thought what you were trying to do was humorous. If you want to do it the right way, come over to my place and I’ll help you learn.” So Tom and his friend Bryan Deere started going to Buzz’s apartment in Columbia, Maryland every week. “He tried to show me stuff but he was not a very patient teacher. I think I picked up a lot more from listening to his recordings than from his instruction. But he was happy to have company and be able to pick and cut up and have a few beers. We would often pick him up and take him to places where there was music.”



Top: Patuxent Partners in 1986. Front Row – Joe Meadows and John Brunschwyler. Standing – Jim Barnett, Tom Mindte, Danny Beach and Bob Hipsley

When Tom was in his early 20s he and guitarist Jim Barnett started their first band, Montgomery County Ramblers. “We played at O’Brien’s Pit Barbeque in Bethesda, MD every Monday night. It was probably the worst night to have a gig but at least we had somewhere to play. Tom

attended Ralph Stanley's McClure Festival in 1983 and Larry Sparks, one of Tom's favorite artists, was there. It was pouring down rain during Larry's set and only one other person was in the audience. And Larry was doing his show just as if the grounds were packed with fans. The other person in the audience was Danny Beach, who was also from Maryland and he loved the Stanley Brothers. They became friends and he joined Tom's band. The band name changed to Patuxent Partners because Danny already was using that name and he had some bookings. This new lineup included Mike Marceau on bass, Curtis Tabor on fiddle and John Barney on banjo. Later John Brunschwiler replaced John Barney and became a regular and integral part of the band for decades. It was fun and just something they did on weekends as all the guys had regular day jobs.

"When Danny Beach was in the band our music was heavy on Stanley Brothers material. After Danny left, Bryan Deere joined the band on guitar and we started doing songs from the repertoire of Buzz Busby, The Stonemans, Benny & Vallie Cain and other DC area bands." Bryan has a wonderful voice with great range and his blend with Tom really clicked.

In the mid 1980s Buzz Busby announced his retirement from music. He was just sitting around his apartment doing nothing and he was miserable. So in 1989 he decided to risk his disability status and reorganize the Bayou Boys. Tom was originally hired to play guitar but became the bass player when Lucky Saylor joined the band. This was a new challenge for Tom for he had to buy a bass and learn to play it before the end of the week. The band was very successful and performed at many important venues including the Washington Folk Festival.

The gig with Buzz lasted about three years but during this time Tom kept the Patuxent Partners together. Jack Leiderman joined the band on fiddle, Vicki McMullen was on bass, Mark Delaney played banjo, and they became mainstays for many years. The band's music and reputation was growing and they enjoyed bookings at the Old School House in Lucketts, Virginia, events sponsored by the Tri-State Bluegrass Association, and some nearby festivals including Joe Cornett's Gettysburg Festival which was a really big deal for them.

Another important event occurred when Tom and Bryan Deere were camped at the Galax Fiddler's Convention and were singing Buzz Busby songs. A couple of teenagers came over and recognized the songs and said "Oh Buzz Busby. He's our favorite." It turned out that they were from Australia and their parents promoted a festival there. This encounter turned into a booking in Australia for the Patuxent Partners. In 2005, 2008 and 2015 the band went to Ireland where they played at festivals and other venues throughout the country. And In 2012 they played at the European World of Bluegrass event in the Netherlands.



Right: Tom Mindte and John Brunschwyler in 2015. Photo by Michael G. Stewart

A very important part of Tom's life is his recording studio and record label. In 1984, he had acquired some basic recording equipment; a reel-to-reel tape recorder and the PA system he used for his band. A local band asked him to record them and they put out a demo with Tom's name on the cassette as the engineer. The demos were passed around and people started calling Tom to record them.

He upgraded his equipment with a multi-track analog tape recorder, some better microphones, and it just grew from there. He rented warehouse space in Rockville and built a state of the art recording studio. A record label in North Carolina wanted to put out an album of Joe Meadows fiddle tunes. Since Joe lived in the DC area he asked the label owner if he could do the recording at Tom's Patuxent Studio. A demo was made, they agreed to use Patuxent, and the album was recorded. The session musicians were Jimmy Gaudreau on mandolin, Mike Munford on banjo, Jack Leiderman on guitar and Vicki McMullen on bass. After the album was finished and the mix was complete, the record company was not able to pay Tom the several thousand dollars owed and they declared bankruptcy. "The only thing that was on my Patuxent Label at that time was my band, Patuxent Partners. I had created the label so the CD would look like a professional release and not like a home-made band issued product. Having already spent so much money on Joe's album I decided to release it on my Patuxent label. I sent a copy to Dave Freeman at County Sales and he loved it and gave it a super review in his newsletter. He bought a good number for the store and the CD sold well." This was the beginning of the Patuxent label and Tom's life as a record producer.

Patuxent Music now has a massive catalog of releases in many genres including bluegrass, old-time, country, blues, jazz and swing. Some of the major bluegrass artists that have recorded on Patuxent include Frank Wakefield, Danny Paisley, Patsy, Roni and Donna Stoneman, Leon Morris, Stephen Wade, Bryan Bowers, Eddie and Martha Adcock, Al Jones, Scott Brannon, Billy Baker and Audie Blaylock. Patuxent has also released several historic recordings including a CD of Blue Sky Boys early radio shows, and a CD of Red Allen and Frank Wakefield 1960s radio shows.

Tom has used his studio and Patuxent Music to record and mentor many young musicians that have gone on to prominent roles in Bluegrass and other genres. Tom met fiddle player Nate Leath at the Fiddler's Grove Festival in North Carolina. "As a teenager he was already very good. He was playing bluegrass but wanted to learn jazz fiddle. Nate had heard Mark O'Connor play and he had the Stephane Grappelli-David Grisman album. I sent him a Stuff Smith album and he just loved it. He came to Rockville and did an album for Patuxent in 2000. There was nobody in his area that played the style of music he liked. So with his family's permission he came to Rockville and lived in Tom's house for the next few years and recorded five more albums. Nate received a scholarship to attend Berklee School of Music in Boston and after graduation went on to play in several touring bands. His band Old School Freight Train was David Grisman's backup band on a nationwide tour. Nate now lives in Nashville and is very busy doing studio sessions. For a few semesters he taught music at Washington and Lee University where he was head of their string department."



Patuxent Partners in 2015 – Jack Leiderman, Tom Mindte, Brian Deere, Vicki McMullen, John Brunschwyler. Photo by Michael G. Stewart

Jordan Ticewas playing guitar with Gary Ferguson at a festival in Southern Maryland and approached Tom because he wanted to play his Lloyd Loar mandolin. He was an amazing guitarist and at the time he was only 16 years old. Tom went to see him perform at a coffee house and after the show approached him about recording. Jordan was excited about doing this and his first album was released in 2005. Three more albums followed and he is now a very busy full time musician and has several different acts going. Sometimes he does a solo act and Hawktail is one of the bands he performs with.

Patrick McAvinue is a fiddler who is now with the US Navy Band, Country Current. Prior to that he was with Daley and Vincent. He recorded two solo albums and an album with his band Charm City Junction which was an Irish influenced old-time band. Patrick also played fiddle with Audie Blaylock and Red Line for a number of years.

Jeremy Stevens is a Reno Style banjo player and guitarist who Tom met at the Galax Old Fiddlers Convention. "He often came by our camp and joined our jam sessions. One time he came by with his guitar and we sang old duets that we knew. I thought we sounded pretty good so I asked him to come to Rockville and record. We did two albums of duets with him on guitar and me on mandolin and in 2012 we did a two-week tour in Canada. Most of the shows were in Manitoba in the dead of winter with temperatures sometimes reaching 30 below zero. The vastness of the country meant driving five or six hours each day between towns and I was absolutely exhausted

at the end of the tour.” Jeremy went on to play guitar with the Chuck Wagon Gang for several years. He is now performing on the festival circuit with his wife, Corina Rose Logston, who is also a Patuxent recording artist. Their band, High Fidelity, is very popular and highly acclaimed. Jeremy and Corina also play with Jesse McReynolds on the Opry and on many of his other appearances.

Brennan Ernst recorded his first album with Patuxent when he was 16 and over the years did five more albums. He is a virtuoso on banjo, jazz guitar, and ragtime piano. His first professional job was on banjo with the Karl Shiflett Big Country Show. He stayed with Karl for more than ten years and during this time also played shows near his home in Virginia with fiddler Billy Hurt and Five Mile Mountain Road. He now lives in Philadelphia and plays in a number of different genres; Bluegrass, Swing and Jazz.

Mason Viawas a regular visitor at Tom’s campsite in Galax. He recorded a duet album with Tom and the album did well with air play and sales. They did a second album with bassist Ben Somerville and this trio made several tours throughout the East Coast. Mason is now with Old Crow Medicine Show and was a contestant on American Idol. He made it through several rounds and performed on the TV broadcasts.

Jesse and Taylor Baker recorded a brother duet album and they each did solo albums. Jesse went on to play banjo with Daly and Vincent and performed on their long running TV show. Russ Carson recorded 2 albums for Patuxent and is now the banjo player with Ricky Skaggs. Some of the other young people that Tom recorded were fiddler Casey Driscoll, fiddler Tatiaina Hargreaves, fiddler Nate Grower, Corey Piatton mandolin, multi-instrumentalist Merl Johnson, fiddler Daniel Greeson, bluegrass band Cane Mill Road, and Victor Furtado on banjo. Victor was a recent recipient of the Steve Martin award for Excellence in Banjo.

For several years Tom hosted a party for his bluegrass friends and as a promotional event for Patuxent Music. In December, 1996 the party fell on the same evening as the wake for John Duffy who had passed away on December 10th. Word of the party was passed around at the wake and Frank Wakefield showed up at Tom’s party. “We did some picking and we got along pretty well. I told him that I had a record label and he said “Oh yeah. Let’s pick another song.” I felt kind of stupid and overwhelmed because here I am picking with Frank Wakefield and he is legendary and has all these records out. A few days later he called me and said “If you really have a record label, I have some songs I want to record.” So he came to Rockville from his home in Saratoga Springs, New York and I recorded him. I was thrilled because I now had releases on Patuxent of Joe Meadows and Frank Wakefield, two luminary bluegrass artists. Over the years Frank has recorded six albums on Patuxent and we have become close friends. He has been a frequent visitor to the area and we did some mandolin workshops together and I was able to arrange several concerts for him. And it was Frank that helped me get to the next level of my mandolin playing.”

The record label takes up most of Tom’s time these days. Currently he is working on projects by artists who have recently signed with Patuxent. The Country Gentlemen Tribute Band perform classic Gents songs and new songs in the Country Gentlemen style. Eddie Ray Buzzini, is a multi-instrumentalist, singer and songwriter from North Carolina. Tom also uses his studio to

record groups for their own projects on other labels and this has been a good source of income. “As of now all 358 CDs we’ve put out are still available. This is my little piece of the recording industry and it’s what I love to do. Sometimes I get surprised and a record will make a lot of money.”

A project that has done quite well is The Patuxent Banjo Project which features 40 prominent banjo players from the Washington, Baltimore and Northern Virginia areas. It was very expensive to produce but it really sold well and Tom was able to recoup the costs and even show a small profit. The full catalog of Patuxent releases can be found on the web site www.pxrec.com.

Tom’s philosophy over the years has been to promote and mentor young upcoming musicians and to provide an outlet for seasoned artists who still have something to say. Although profit is certainly important, the Patuxent label is more interested in enhancing the careers and development of artists that do not have the opportunity to record on major labels. Tom, who has a Master’s Degree in Electrical Engineering, was the 2020 recipient of the Washington Monument Award from the DC Bluegrass Union; an honor bestowed in recognition of his important contributions to the Bluegrass music industry. He is a member of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, the Recording Academy, and the IBMA. Tom has worked very hard and accomplished so much over the years. And I am sure more exciting events and achievements are on the horizon.