

Alan Munde: Play the Melody



by [Dale McCurry](#) 5 hours ago

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Alan Munde participates in Big Momma's Bluegrass Jam at Big Momma's Coffee and Espresso Bar on Commercial Street in Springfield on Saturday, Feb. 25, 2023. (Photo by Jym Wilson)

It is 1962, and 16-year-old Alan Munde sits in front of the TV in his home in Norman, Oklahoma. With banjo in hand, he watches the Saturday afternoon country music shows. He sees

it all; hears it all. Sometimes he is aware of the audience and the applause — perhaps the way the performers are dressed — but it is the music that holds the magic.

Munde notes every detail. The way the notes bend together here and blend there. How the mandolin provides rhythm there and then finds and refines the tune here. When the banjo is driving the song, and when it is nipping at the heels of the melody. When western-born country music uses the lonesome wail of a steel guitar to evoke the pain of living. Better yet, how to make the five-string Munde clutches weep like a pedal-steel.

Like many with a newfound passion and craft, teenaged Alan no doubt imagines himself becoming a better and better musician and wonders if he can learn to make a living with the instrument he holds — like those who play for him now.

Never — not ever — could he have dreamed that by the time he was a 77-year-old Springfield, Missouri, resident, he would quite simply be regarded as one of the best American banjoists and banjo educators ever, according to virtually everyone who knows the instrument and its history.

The most significant thing about Alan Munde being the recipient of both the Steve Martin Banjo Prize and American Banjo Museum Hall of Fame induction is that neither honor was his goal. Alan has humbly spent a lifetime amassing and freely sharing banjo passion and knowledge with the worldwide banjo community and the honors bestowed upon him are in sincere recognition of his selfless life's work.

—American Banjo Museum Executive Director — himself, a Hall of Fame inductee — **Johnny Baier**, to the Springfield Daily Citizen.

Muddling the groove

The early-'60s surge of folk music attracted Munde to the guitar, followed by the banjo and, subsequently, bluegrass music — especially bluegrass featuring the style of Earl Scruggs and other three-finger pickers.

“A friend gave me the Flatt and Scruggs ‘Foggy Mountain Banjo’ record,” Alan says. “That sealed the deal on my interest in the banjo.



Alan Munde sitting in at Pappy's Pub in June of 2021. (Photo by Jym Wilson)

"I played through high school with anyone I could find. Older folks who were interested in country music. Some were aware of bluegrass but only as a part of country music."

Norman, Oklahoma was half a continent removed from ground zero of the East Coast bluegrass scene. The tradeoff was exposure to country music with the western influences of such artists as George Jones, Bob Wills, Lefty Frizzell and others.

"As a youth," Munde says, "I would play with anybody on any kind of music I thought I could muddle through. The people of all musical stripes were happy and welcoming, allowing me to muddle in the midst of their music-making. It was really helpful."

Munde continues to have an interest and talent for "muddling" these and other influences into evolutionary alchemies of style and genre.

“In college, I met world-class fiddler, Byron Berline,” he recalls. “We played together for a couple of years. We would travel around to fiddle contests — I would accompany him on the guitar — and to play with area players who were into bluegrass.

“It was through Byron I met my banjo mentor, Eddie Shelton. He was a fine and knowledgeable player and advanced for the time. I learned a great deal from him.”

Alan Munde has shared stage and studio with just about every nationally and internationally known bluegrass player past and present. He has a big fan base of youngsters, too — with his fine work in banjo camps and classrooms across the country. He is one of the most talented, respected and well liked players in bluegrass music and is destined to be inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Association Hall of Fame. I’m honored and proud to call him my friend.

— **Mike Smith** to the Springfield Daily Citizen. Smith is an iconic Ozarks broadcaster and founder and host of KSMU’s “Seldom Heard Music” for more than 40 years.

Fiddling about

Munde met Sam Bush and his guitarist friend, Wayne Stewart, at a fiddle contest in Salisbury, Missouri, in 1968. Bush, a bit of a prodigy, wasn’t yet a household name, but he was a three-time winner of the junior division of the National Oldtime Fiddlers Contest — as well as destined to become a 2023 Bluegrass Hall of Fame inductee.



Album cover for Alan Munde, bluegrass style banjo player. (Photo by Jym Wilson)

Stewart was interested in the more progressive bluegrass of the day, or what there was of it — traditional-string-bending innovators such as the Country Gentlemen, the Dillards and the progressive elements of Bill Monroe's band of the '60s, including Bill Keith, Peter Rowan, Lamar Grier and Richard Greene.

"Meeting Wayne was a big moment in that he was a kindred spirit and a good musician," Munde recalls. "He was maybe 25 at the time — a fervent bluegrass enthusiast, guitar player and singer.

"It was startling to play with such a fine pair of players. We immediately connected on a personal and musical level. We shared the same love of bluegrass, but were willing to try new things that were going on in bluegrass at the time.

"Straight out of college, I made a beeline to Kentucky to get together with Wayne and Sam."

Munde's time in Kentucky was short. To make a keepsake of their brief time together, the threesome recorded a great deal of instrumental music on a standard-of-the-day tape recorder in a house in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

The result is "Poor Richard's Almanac," originally released in 1969 and remixed and released by Ridge Runner Records in 1976.

"It may have been one of the first albums featuring younger players seeking higher ground within the traditional bluegrass setting," says Alan.

It was a perfect storm of talent and innovation; a well-stocked palette of art and craft; an exciting alignment of timing and rising stars.

Alan Munde is one of my absolute favorite banjo players. Why do I love him? Let me count the ways: 1. There's that impeccable 'dry roll'—with the implicit perfect time and bounce embedded. 2. There's the way he's trail-blazed in the melodic style, always in the service of making every note of a fiddle tune melody sound like it originated on the banjo. 3. There's that tone—he's one of the rare guys that pulls a whole lot of tone—and he doesn't need a prewar flathead to do it. 4. There's his wit—which comes through in his playing. He can even make playing mostly out of time sound great. 5. There are the classic Country Gazette's fantastic recordings (and Alan's own wonderful records) which have inspired so many of us to play with feel, tone, serious technique and to always be musical. I guess that's it. I love him five ways, just like Cincinnati chili.

— **Béla Fleck**, American Banjo hall-of-famer and Steve Martin Banjo Award board member quoted from the November 2016 issue of "Banjo Newsletter: The 5-String Magazine."

Taste of Truegrass

While Munde and others were blurring the lines of bluegrass and exploring new ground, there were large contingencies of traditional-minded musicians and fans who could not agree on where

the line was — or if there were a line — between paying homage to the early greats and giving due respect to later players and their heartfelt art.



Alan Munde makes a guest appearance at a house concert on August 12, 2022, in Springfield. (Photo by Jym Wilson)

“That raises a difficult question,” Munde says. “I support musicians who want to make the music they want to make. It’s up to them to determine the boundaries and to use whatever words they feel is best in talking about it. It’s like [renown five-string banjo artist] Tony Trischka, says: ‘In bluegrass, to be different, you don’t have to be very different.’”

In late 1969, Munde auditioned for traditional bluegrass headliner Jimmy Martin and was offered a job in his band, the Sunny Mountain Boys. Munde moved to Nashville and played banjo with Martin from October 1969 to October 1971.

“I recorded 12 sides with Martin for Decca Records in those two years,” Munde says, “before moving to L.A. to join Byron [Berline] as he was forming Country Gazette in Southern California. I was with Gazette through many personnel changes for 20 years.”

I waited on each subsequent LP release with the enthusiasm that I used to expend in previous years for the next Beatles album. Alan never disappointed whether it be his standard-setting solo albums or his many subsequent recordings with Country Gazette. If you're looking for the absolutely perfect way to play a tune, seek out a version of Alan Munde playing it.

—**Bill Evans**, Banjo player, educator, and historian as well as 2022 Steve Martin Banjo Prize winner. Evans was quoted from the November 2016 issue of “Banjo Newsletter: The 5-String Magazine.”

L.A. laurels

When the Kentucky Colonels — featuring Roland and Clarence White — moved to Southern California in the early '60s, they had a huge impact. The White brothers, along with [the Dillards](#), were among a handful of kindred artists who created the sound and soul of California bluegrass while helping invent country rock.

Country Gazette followed suit, becoming an L.A.-based country rock and progressive bluegrass band in the spirit of Eric Weisberg, the Greenbriar Boys, the Hillmen (which included Chris Hillman), and rock legends the Byrds.

“In all, I think it was what talent we had,” Munde says of the ground-breaking band, “plus a West Coast perspective of music-making that was influenced by the music we all loved but was a little more expansive in song selection, harmonies and arrangements than the music in the traditional bluegrass approach.

“An important element was our producer, Jim Dickson,” Munde said. “West Coast-raised, he had worked with and produced many types of artists since the late '50s. He was into bluegrass as a creative and exciting musical form rather than a style to be replicated.”

In addition to a 20-year run as a band, Gazette members released several collaborative and solo recordings that featured other members as well as playing on scores of other artists' recordings.

Some folks [think Alan is] a chromatic banjo player [run style of play popularized by Nashville session banjo player Bobby Thompson] and I would say, “Wrong!” He's a fine melodic and Scruggs player and blends them both into his own style. What I like about playing with Alan is his timing and that he knows what he's playing; he makes a statement, rather than just playing scales or licks.

— **Roland White**, groundbreaking mandolin player, Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame inductee and Country Gazette member from the mid '70s through the early '90s. White was quoted from the November 2016 issue of “Banjo Newsletter: The 5-String Magazine.”

Teach your children

Munde has embraced the role of a banjo teacher for decades. In addition to carrying the art and craft of his instrument forward as an educator, Munde's playing style, influence and musical knowledge made him a noteworthy innovator featured in several books and magazines.

He was an assistant professor of music in the Creative Arts Department of South Plains College in Levelland, Texas, from 1986-2007. He's produced 19 music instructional books and 17 instructional DVDs. In 1975, Munde initiated and developed the concept of group workshops for banjo instruction. He has conducted eight to ten workshops per year since.

"Since then, I have been working steadily as an instructor at music camps as well as touring as a performer, which is what I do to this day," Munde said.

"It's easy to explain," Munde explains. "I didn't invent any of the music. I depended on others to learn from. Music-making is a collaboration, and I'm happy to pass on what I have to offer, just as others were with me."

Alan Munde is not only one of the all-time great banjo players but a very nice guy with a pleasantly odd sense of humor. His playing has power, smoothness and inventiveness throughout. He has been a guiding light for banjo players worldwide for decades with both his masterful playing and the dedication and wisdom in his teaching.

— **Pete Wernick** to the Springfield Daily Citizen. Wernick, also known as "Mr. Banjo," is a founding member of Hot Rize and a noted banjo player and educator.

For info on Alan Munde's classes and more visit: <https://almundesbanjocollege.com/>

Ever Excelsior



Alan Munde listens intently during a recording session at Studio 2100 in Springfield on July 5, 2022. (Photo by Jym Wilson)

“Alan has a new album coming out, by the way,” says Kathryn “Kitty” Ledbetter, an Ozarks broadcaster, bass player and Alan’s wife. “It’s all original and not like anything else he’s done. I don’t know how he continues to reinvent himself.”

The album, “Excelsior,” released earlier this month on the Patuxent label, was financed by the Steve Martin Banjo Prize cash award.

Munde chose to use the prize money that came with the coveted award to make an album which longtime Washington, D.C., bluegrass broadcaster and historian Katy Daley calls, “a collection of Alan’s original music written to showcase his strong remembrances of people or places he encountered in his 50-plus years of music.”

“It seemed to me a good use of the money,” Munde says. “Very much so. It’s what musicians and artists do: Produce.”

To read Alan’s extensive liner notes he wrote for the album and to buy stuff, visit <http://www.pxrec.com>

Alan had been my premier banjo hero since I first learned about him in the mid '70s from the album “Poor Richard’s Almanac.” He was one of the few players who made banjo sound sweet and melodic; you could take a piece of melody from about any of his solos and write a song

around it. I was excited for my friend Kitty Ledbetter when she told me they were dating in Texas; I had probably a half a dozen of his records from his band Country Gazette and other records he was on. So, I was ecstatic when they started coming up here to visit, and I got to pick with him and we became friends. You can't not like the guy; he has a very dry and wry sense of humor, has the best stories, and knows at least a little bit about damn near everything. It was one of my highest musical honors to get invited to play rhythm on a song of his, plus getting the song title to boot!

—Bo Brown to the Springfield Daily Citizen. Bo is a long-time Ozarks-based multi-instrumentalist and founding member of The Undergrass Boys who plays guitar on an “Excelsior” song and is the subject of the album’s Number 9 cut, “Bo Knows.”

Alan Munde’s Favorite Banjo Joke

First person: What’s worse than two banjos?

Second person: Three?

First person: Nothing.

All Awards Aside

“Last year, Alan and I went to Nashville for Roland White’s memorial concert at the Station Inn,” says Kitty. “The place was packed with notables. Among them was Vince Gill, who played after Alan. Vince expressed his respect for Roland and then said: ‘You know, as I sat down in the audience watching Alan’s fingers on the banjo I felt 15 years old again.’

“It was a sweet tribute to the influence Alan has had on generations of banjo players and musicians.”

“Alan has been a part of several ‘if you’re in the know, you know’ recording events that are part of the extreme bluegrass pickers collection” writes Daley for “Excelsior’s” bio. “As a follow-up to ‘Poor Richard’s Almanac,’ Alan and Bush recorded the highly regarded duo project, ‘Sam and Alan, Together Again For The First Time.’ After that, he held down the banjo chair on several historically remarkable recordings.

“In addition, he recorded many of his own albums including the ground-breaking debut album ‘Banjo Sandwich.’ He’s been there when ‘being there’ was important.”

They say what goes around comes around. A life well lived is often a surprisingly true circle like a carefully crafted banjo rim. Someone hands Munde an instrument with which to change his life and he passes it forward.

The teenager who wondered “What if?” at the call of a song could not have known that wonder would lead to a place where he could look back with a satisfied mind on his life in music.

“That I play better than I ever thought I could is a constant surprise,” Munde says. “To play well enough to have made music with some really great players is a great treat.

“I am now 77 years old, and I find the reward in playing music is in the joy of participating in the many wonderful musical experiences — large and small — I’ve had in my career. The awards are like icing on the cake. I really appreciate the awards, but they are really in recognition of all the people I have learned from and played music with. Nothing I have ever done was by myself; it has always been a collaboration.

“We played places that ranged between the centuries-old concert hall in Amsterdam to the floor of a barn of a chicken farmer.

“And it was all good.”

And what of a core tenet by which Munde has lived his life?

“When all else fails,” he says, wryly, “play the melody.”

Alan Munde has occupied a place of honor in my personal pantheon of banjo heroes for almost as long as I can remember. I kept a picture of him with his Stelling Staghorn banjo on my wall all through my teens and wore Adidas red-striped tennis shoes because he wore them too. I tried for years to emulate his right hand. Punch, drive, groove—Alan has it all. And that’s before you even dig into his musical ideas which have always pushed the envelope for the banjo and made all of our ears bigger. On top of all of that, Alan is just a great person. The encouragement he gave me when I was starting out meant the world to me and I carry his kind words with me still.

—Alison Brown to the Springfield Daily Citizen. The Grammy Award winner was the first woman to receive an International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) award in an instrumental category (1991, Banjo). She and her producer/bassist/husband, Garry West, are co-chairs of the Steve Martin Banjo Prize and co-founders of Compass Records.



[Dale McCurry](#)

Dale McCurry is a co-founder of NoteWorthy Music and publisher and managing editor of “High Notes” and “The Wires and the Wood” magazines. He has been a published writer for more than 30 years. His work has appeared in more than 25 publications and he has served as editor of hundreds of issues of more than 15 newspapers, magazines, and niche publications.

[More by Dale McCurry](#)

