

Feature

Taking bluegrass tunes to Europe

By MARK SHAVER
Staff Writer

The high-pitched, strident voice of bluegrass, born in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Appalachia some 40 years ago, is now being raised around the world.

The Shady Grove Band, a 6-year-old Chapel Hill bluegrass band appearing Friday at the ArtsCenter in Carrboro, leaves on its fifth European tour Feb. 1.

Bluegrass is not just an oddity in Europe, the band says. Europeans know the music.

And some, like the French, are possessed by it.

"The French are wild. They love it. They go nuts," says bass player Lynn Davis.

The band says that the wildest are the Bretons, who live in the northwest corner of France.

"They're a rowdy bunch of folks," says Jerry Brown, who plays guitar and clawhammer banjo, and who is the founder of Shady Grove.

The Bretons are more in touch with their folk roots, the band believes, and thus are better able to appreciate bluegrass, which has roots that reach back hundreds of years to Scottish and English settlers of Appalachia.

The band estimates that there are more than 20 bluegrass bands in France. Though French, these bands

still mouth the lyrics in English.

"We often get quizzed as to what the words are exactly," Brown says.

Not all Europeans are as emotional about bluegrass as the French.

"The Germans have a little more self-restraint," Davis says. "They just sit there and don't say anything — but then you get a great review."

The band will travel to Holland, Germany, Switzerland and France, playing 31 shows in 30 days, Brown says.

But before they do, they will have an album party Friday night at the ArtsCenter to celebrate the release of their second album, *On the Line*, which will be on the Flying Fish label.

Their first album, *Shine on Me*, was on an independent label, Blue Ridge Records, and was not widely distributed, according to Charles Pettee, who plays mandolin and guitar and who writes most of the original music played by the band.

Unlike their first album, *On the Line* will be distributed nationally and internationally.

"They're going to send out 750 promos right off the top," Pettee says. "That's almost what our entire first pressing was."

The band is also working on an instrumental album to be released later in the year.

Davis, Pettee and Brown have been with the band since its beginning in

1981. Daniel Casey, the banjo player, joined the band about six months ago.

All of the Shady Grove players sing lead and harmony vocals. Besides their original music, the band plays traditional music and sings a cappella.

The band also mixes skits and comedy in with its music and has been known to beat a rubber chicken to entertain the audience.

"We try to stomp around and be fun," Brown says.

The band works full-time, and when it is not in Europe it is traveling around the United States, performing at bluegrass festivals, colleges, bars and wherever else seems appropriate.

"We've ended up in anything from a flat-bed truck to a concert with a couple thousand people," Davis says. "Sometimes we end up in the backwoods."



The Shady Grove Band will perform at ArtsCenter on Friday

The right stuff: baked potatoes supreme

By ROBIN HARDY
Staff Writer

Baked potatoes are one of my favorite vegetables, and in the past few years the trend has been to stuff them with all kinds of goodies and serve them as a complete meal. There's fairly little work involved, depending on what you decide to stuff them with, and they are relatively inexpensive to make if you are on a tight budget.

But before you can stuff the potato, you have to bake it. There are several types of potatoes for baking and most of those grown in America are suitable. The first step in preparation is to wash it well and dry it. The next step is baking. I like my potato skins crispy and I believe the best way to achieve this is by rubbing the potato well with some

sort of fat and salt. I use bacon fat because of its wonderful flavor, but vegetable oil or shortening can be substituted. If you don't want the calories or you prefer your skins moist, you can bake the potato plain or wrap it in aluminum foil. Place the potato in a preheated oven of 400 to 450 degrees and bake for approximately 45 minutes to an hour. To make sure the potato's done, hold it between two pot holders and squeeze. The skin should give a little and the inside should feel soft. To compare, squeeze the potato before baking. It should be quite firm; if not, pick another potato.

There are two ways to stuff the potato. The first is to cut the potato lengthwise in half and scoop out the flesh into a bowl. I like my potatoes fattening, so I mash mine with a little butter, sour cream and milk. But if

you'd prefer to put your butter and sour cream on the top, or you don't like it at all, just use a little milk to soften up the potato. It also makes it easier to mash. Once you've mashed the potato flesh well, add salt and pepper to taste and anything else you want. Return the mixture to your potato skin, place on a baking dish or cookie sheet lined with aluminum foil, sprinkle with cheese and return to a hot oven, about 400 degrees, until the potato is thoroughly reheated and the cheese has melted.

The second way is easier and less time consuming, but not as tasty. Make a small pocket in the potato by pinching both ends or by making a slice down the middle and squeezing to open up the potato and pile your goodies on top. If you choose to stuff your potato this way, I definitely recommend topping it with some butter or sour cream to moisten it up.

Here are some of my favorite stuffing combinations:

- Beef tips, green, red or yellow peppers, scallions and cheese
- Ham, broccoli and tomatoes
- Shrimp or crab, mushrooms and snow peas (if you're willing to spend some extra money)

A few things to remember: if you're using green vegetables, carrots, celery, mushrooms, or tomatoes, I would recommend sauteing them slightly in a little butter first, or, for broccoli and peas, steaming them. There are many possibilities — just use your imagination and enjoy.

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