



# A little bit country

Berkshire-based bluegrass band Acoustic Blue will headline the third annual Bluegrass Show this Saturday at the ITAM Lodge **The 413 - D1**

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# THE 413

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Thursday, January 26, 2012

## THEY'RE NO HILLBILLIES



Photo courtesy Missy Zink

Acoustic Blue bandmates are, from left, Larry Neu, 57, of Rehoboth, on banjo; Corey Zink, 32 of Pittsfield, lead vocalist, mandolin player and songwriter. Ray Evans, 21, of Granville, N.Y., the upright bass; and Shaun Batho, 38, of Pittsfield on rhythm guitar.

# Acoustic Blue

## Berkshire-based bluegrass

By Jenn Smith  
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD

The boys of the Berkshire County-based band Acoustic Blue can be heard on Pandora Radio, on iTunes, and on various radio stations across the country.

They recently returned from Nashville where they were showcased at the International Bluegrass Music Association Conference. This winter they are heading to Virginia to record their fifth album.

But here, they're still strangers to audiences in their own backyard.

"In Berkshire County, there's not a lot of bluegrass to be seen," said Corey Zink, 32 of Pittsfield, Acoustic Blue's lead vocalist, mandolin player and songwriter.

The group also includes Shaun Batho, 38, of Pittsfield, on rhythm guitar; Larry Neu, 57, of Rehoboth, on banjo; and newest and youngest member Ray Evans, 21, of Granville, N.Y., playing the upright bass.

BLUEGRASS, continued on D2

Ray Evans, below, and Corey Zink, right, in rehearsal.



### If you go...

**What:** Third annual Berkshire Bluegrass Show, featuring Acoustic Blue, Al & Kathy Bain, The Evans Family Band and Washington County Line. Dave Helman will be the master of ceremonies.

**When:** Saturday, from 2 to 6 p.m.

**Where:** Sons of Italy ITAM Lodge, 93 Waubeek Road, Pittsfield.

**Cost:** Tickets are available at the door at \$15 per person. Youths age 16 and younger are admitted free. Food and beverages will be available for purchase.

**Info:** Visit [www.acousticblueonline.com](http://www.acousticblueonline.com). or call (413) 442-6098.

### BLUEGRASS from D1

This Saturday, the group hopes to add to their local fan base as they dress in their finest suits and strum up a storm during the third annual Berkshire Bluegrass Show at the ITAM Lodge in Pittsfield. The family-friendly concert event also features Al and Kathy Bain, The Evans Family Band and Washington County Line, all of New York State.

With more mainstream bluegrass works out there, like the "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?" (2000) soundtrack; the double-platinum banjo-infused Mumford & Sons record "Sigh No More" (2010); and even Mass MoCA's FreshGrass festival of bluegrass and art held back in September, Acoustic Blue hopes more people will be inclined to tune into their old school sound.

Here, Acoustic Blue takes a break with The Eagle to talk about building a fan base among the next generation, touring the festival scene, and why you won't want to miss out on this growing musical scene.

**Eagle:** Aside from this weekend's Berkshire Bluegrass Show, do you guys play around here much?

**Shaun Batho:** Not really. In the summer time we're gone most weekends at festivals, either on stage or just off in the fields playing with other people. But our goal for the band now is to try to not just have a season, but play more places, including around here, year-round.

**Eagle:** How did you guys get into the genre of bluegrass music to begin with?

**Batho:** Bluegrass music is also for people who like country music, particularly the traditional kind. Corey's dad (Ron Zink) actually taught me how to play the guitar. So I'd be over their house all the time. Back then, when Corey's dad was playing, night life was country music.

**Corey Zink:** I went to festivals with my family. You do often have to travel because you can't really find much bluegrass being played around here, especially nowadays. At the festivals though, you find this blend of hardcore bluegrass musicians and country fans, and it's really a great time.

**Larry Neu:** I have a very traditional story. I was born in West Virginia and grew up in Appalachia. I remember hearing bluegrass on the late-night AM radio. Also back then, before school, there would be bluegrass on TV instead of the morning show news. That all kind of got me into liking the music. But the turning point for playing it was when I saw "Bonnie and Clyde," and hear the music of Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs.

**Ray Evans:** My parents are always playing old country. When I was 15, I went to my first festival, and it was the best thing I ever did. One day, my mom left her bass on the cellar floor while she went to do something. I picked it up and I just never stopped.



Photos by Jenn Smith / Berkshire Eagle Staff



'Bluegrass music is also for people who like country music, particularly the traditional kind,' says Shaun Batho, above.

'It's very technical, almost like jazz, but almost more difficult to play,' says Larry Neu, left.

**Eagle:** How did you guys know that you actually wanted to form a group and start playing gigs?

**Batho:** Corey and I got the idea, so we started looking and searching out people. A lot of it was just about finding people with personality, because that's a big part of being part of a group. We've changed some members over the years, but this is pretty much it now.

**Eagle:** Any recordings coming up?

**Batho:** We're going to Virginia in March to record our fifth CD with Mountain Fever Records and Sammy Shelor. He was recently on David Letterman's show for winning the Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass.

**Eagle:** So since you can't find a lot of bluegrass here, where can you go to see and hear it?

**Zink:** There was the Noppert Hill Bluegrass Festival [Lanesborough]. In the Catskills there's Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival [Oak Hill, N.Y.]. There's the Joe Val Bluegrass Festival coming up in February in Framingham, where bluegrass musicians take over the whole Sheraton hotel. But we hope to bring more bluegrass to the area. It be great to do something like Joe Val at the Crowne Plaza.

**Batho:** For an area like Berkshire County, that's all about music, theater and art, you'd think there be more. But having someone like Del McCoury play here for the first time up at Mass MoCA is pretty big. There have also been shows in Albany, N.Y. at The Egg, and even the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield hosted Sam Bush and Cherryholmes.

**Eagle:** Why do you think it's harder to draw people, particularly younger people, into the bluegrass genre around here?

**Batho:** I think when you say the word "bluegrass," a lot of people instantly think of overalls and straw hats or the Beverly Hillbillies. I'm an architect by day, and I lot of people don't know I play bluegrass.

**Eagle:** Why should people pay more attention to this kind of music?

**Neu:** It's very technical, almost like jazz, but almost more difficult to play. There are no electronics, so you can't hide anything.

**Zink:** I also think it affects people in a different way because there's a history of storytelling in it.

**Eagle:** So where would you like to see this scene head?

**Evans:** There are not too many people my age out playing on this scene, but you're starting to see more. It would be great if more people came out to listen or play.

**Zink:** We're trying to promote to young kids and we let them pick up the instruments because we don't want to see this dying off. These concerts are very family-friendly in a great, safe environment where you can let your kid run off for a while and know they'll be OK.

**Neu:** Also, there's kind of a resurgence. No longer is bluegrass just related to the hills and hollers of Appalachia. It's still somewhat underground, but there are younger folks playing like the groups Hot Mustard and Della Mae, which are drawing younger crowds. "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" did great things for our genre.

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