

The Atlas Cafe Bluegrass and Old-Time Jam in San Francisco.

By Michal Staninec

Now in its ninth year, the monthly jam at Atlas Cafe is getting to be a real institution in San Francisco. It was started by Jimbo Trout who does the booking for the other bluegrass and old-time acts in the cafe on Thursdays. His bandmate and friend Chad Manning was also involved in the beginning. The jam is hosted on the last Thursday of every month by Jimbo and the house band who will back up guest musicians, but on occasion, the entire band may be replaced for a couple of tunes when enough other musicians or another whole band shows up. The house band consists of Jimbo on banjo and guitar, Ted Silverman on mandolin and guitar, Tom Drohan on bass, Jimmy Sweetwater on harmonica and washboard, yours truly on guitar, and some coming and going fiddlers, lately mostly Katy Rexford. My daughter, Annie Staninec got her first regular gig here as the house band fiddler at age 13 and stuck it out until she went away to college. The vocals are shared by all band members and guests.

The tunes are mostly bluegrass, some old-timey and a few swing and country numbers occasionally get thrown into the mix. On a couple of occasions in the past, Chad Manning brought most of his fiddle students and we actually had 15 fiddlers on stage at the same time! The audience loved it. We have many guests who show up almost every time and they include some of the most popular and active bluegrass musicians in San Francisco: Pam Brandon (aka Belle Monroe), Jordan Klein, Diana Greenberg, Jeannie and Chuck Poling, Patti & Ted Garber, Eric Embry, Mayumi Urgino, Karen Cribbs, Josh Hadley, Ron Esparza etc. The number of jammers varies from month to month, you never know what you're gonna get on a given night. On those rare sparse nights the house band had to play most of the evening with no guests, and on busy nights we can have 20 jammers or more.

The jam is miked with several instrumental and vocal mikes, and this gives it more of performance flavor than your basic circle jams. The sound is good throughout the cafe and singers and soloists can be heard quite well all the way to the back (actually front, the stage is in the back) of the cafe. This arrangement also gives new jammers a chance to work the mike and really step up and perform. Several regular jammers started this way and then went on to join or form bands of their own. However, it is not necessary to step up to the mike to jam with the band, some of the more shy jammers just hang in the back of the band and pick along without stepping up to the mike. The jam can thus accommodate any level jammer, from a novice to a seasoned performer, and on most nights this is exactly what you will see on the stage.

The Atlas Cafe is located on the corner of 20th street and Alabama in the Mission. It is a pleasant neighborhood place with soups, sandwiches, salads and pizza on the menu. The quality of the food is very good, so planning to have dinner while listening to music is an excellent option here. A couple of more unusual items on the menu include the Cuban beef sandwich and my personal favorite, the smoked trout salad. There are espresso drinks, beer on tap, wine and a selection of deserts. The website has the menu and lots of other information, including the music schedule: <http://www.atlascafe.net/>. The parking in San Francisco is legendary for being difficult, and although it is not exactly easy around Atlas, it is not impossible, usually a spot can be had within a couple of blocks.

I hope this great jam continues for a long, long time and continues to develop new musicians and bands. Come on down and join us!

Where: Atlas Cafe, 3049 20th St @ Alabama St in the Mission District. San Francisco 94110.

Phone: (415) 648 – 1047

When: Last Thursday of the month, 8-10 PM. May change around holidays.