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Schooled in the art and traditions of Bluegrass

Bluegrass sprouts in the schools

 By [Dan Nailen](#)
[The Salt Lake Tribune](#)

Ron Spears was a West High School student playing electric guitar when the bluegrass bug bit him.

It was Flatt & Scruggs' theme from "The Beverly Hillbillies" that first caught his ear, along with the "Dueling Banjos" on the "Deliverance" soundtrack, the "Hee-Haw" television show and banjo player John Hartford's regular appearances on "The Glen Campbell Show."

"I was playing heavy-metal guitar for a number of years, and I just found [bluegrass] to be really refreshing and cool," said Spears, now 52, a full-time touring member of bluegrass band The Special Consensus.

There was just one problem for a kid wanting to learn how to play traditional acoustic and bluegrass music in Salt Lake City.

"I didn't have anyone to teach me. It was pretty hard to find anybody who was into that [music]," said Spears, who taught himself banjo by playing vinyl records at half-speed, over and over again. "You'd wear out your records trying to figure out what was going on."

In 2006, aspiring bluegrass musicians have a few more options than Spears did.

The International Bluegrass Music Association, a Nashville-based organization with members in all 50 states and 30 countries, developed Bluegrass in the Schools, which includes teacher workshops, matching grants for school districts to attract bluegrass artists, lesson plans, and a DVD "Discover Bluegrass: Exploring American Roots Music," targeted at children between 8 and 13 years old and costing educators only \$3.



Members of the bluegrass band The Special Consensus - Greg Cahill, left, Justin Carbone, Ron Spears and Tres Nugent - will give a workshop at Judge Memorial High School Tuesday and a concert Tuesday evening. (Mark Montgomery)

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Dan Hays, executive director of the IBMA, said the program does more than educate students about the history of one of America's native music forms, citing studies that show kids benefit in numerous ways from exposure to the arts. And exploring bluegrass can help in geography lessons through tracking the music's evolution; in social studies by exploring the socio-economic aspects of the music's birth; and in math, by counting off the music's rhythms.

Locally, the Intermountain Acoustic Music Association is doing its part to introduce kids to bluegrass, sponsoring concerts throughout the year and hosting the annual Founder's Title Folk & Bluegrass Festival and its affiliated teaching workshops. On Tuesday, the IAMA will host a workshop and concert by The Special Consensus at Salt Lake City's Judge Memorial Catholic High School.

The Special Consensus is led by banjo player Greg Cahill, former chairman of the International Bluegrass Music Association's Bluegrass in the Schools committee. He started doing educational workshops in 1984 and has made working with schools a regular part of The Special Consensus' touring schedule for most of his career, including stops across the country as well as in South America, Ireland, England, Scotland, "pretty much everywhere."

Cahill began teaching bluegrass to kids when he was working as a Chicago-area social worker, giving free banjo lessons on the side to at-risk youth. Eventually he was able to do music full time, but his old social-work cohorts kept asking him to come back with his banjo when he was on tour. That inspired him to do some research, put together a study guide and create the prototype of the Bluegrass in the Schools program.

"There were some places where we'd go in, and you could see the kids as they were filing in, looking at us standing there with our pea-shooter instruments with no amps and no drums, and they're going, 'Oh God,' " Cahill said. "But then by the end they're coming up and chatting, even asking for autographs.

"I think we're making inroads in being able to get into the schools, get in front of the young folks, with the theory being that if they would just hear it, they would probably like it."

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Ramona Mayer, Judge Memorial's music director, said the school has hosted presentations in the past by traditional Russian musicians and big-band players, and having The Special Consensus workshop is "just a fabulous opportunity to see a new genre up close and personally" for many students who might not be familiar with the

become," Mayer said, describing the benefit to the students, adding that "the best way to learn is to have a good time and you don't know you're learning."

The IBMA's Hays said groups like The Special Consensus are vital to keeping bluegrass music alive, as are other educational components in which the IBMA is involved. Since the fall of 2004, Hays said, the IBMA has sent out roughly 3,000 copies of the "Discover Bluegrass" DVD, and the group has developed grant programs, teacher workshops and lesson plans to help educators present bluegrass as part of America's cultural history.

"[Bluegrass in the Schools] is one of our most important priorities in trying to introduce young people to the music, both in an educational way and an entertaining way that serves to get them oriented and build some positive impressions about the music," Hays said. "A lot of times, [the kids] are seeing a banjo for the first time. They look at these things and they get to hold them in their hands, to hear them and touch them. It's always interesting to see those reactions."

The IAMA's Tony Polychronis, aka "The Old Man" of KRCL and host of the "Bluegrass Express" show Sunday afternoons, said The Special Consensus workshop next week will be the first time a Bluegrass in the Schools program has arrived in Utah. He said it was a natural fit for the IAMA.

"It satisfies our mission statement, that we promote, preserve and further acoustic music, and bluegrass is one part of acoustic music," Polychronis said.

And for Spears, doing a workshop in his hometown is a bonus.

"Maybe one of these kids will come up to me 10 years from now and say, 'The only reason I started playing this music is because I saw you in my school,'" Spears said. "You're touching people, you're spreading the music and you're hoping the kids will get the bug and want to carry on."

Contact Dan Nailen at nailen@sltrib.com or via his blog "Urban Spelunker" at www.sltrib.com/blogs. His phone number is 801-257-8613. Send comments to livingeditor@sltrib.com.

Showing the way

The bluegrass workshop includes:

- * Performances of traditional bluegrass songs, Irish songs and gospel songs.

- * An explanation of the roots of traditional American music and the origins of traditional country music.

- * Explanations and demonstrations of different instruments and harmony singing.

Roots music

- * The Special Consensus performs Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. in the Judge Memorial High School Auditorium, 650 S. 1100 East, Salt Lake City. Tickets are \$10 in advance, \$15 at the door, and are available at Acoustic Music and Local Music.

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