

# Banjo hootenanny monthly at Molloy's!

BY JEAN BARTLETT  
| ARTS AND FEATURES WRITER |

More than 40 years ago, a couple of friends who played the banjo, Ray Bell and Phil Smith, decided it was time to form a banjo band in San Francisco.

“Other communities had one,” they thought, “so why not San Francisco?”

They took out an ad, and the banjo players came knocking. First, the banjo players rehearsed in Smith's garage, and some of the neighbors pulled up lawn chairs to have a listen. But there were those “other” neighbors, including the one who penned Smith a letter: “Con-



JEAN BARTLETT PHOTO  
Bill Portman, music director, SFBB, 4th of July weekend, 2013.

sider the words of Mark Twain: ‘a gentleman is someone who knows how to play the banjo and doesn't!’” According to an old *San Francisco Chronicle* clipping, the rehearsing banjo players moved to the bakery where Smith worked, and played until they received formal notification stating something in this vein: “You are not licensed to entertain. All group banjo playing must cease immediately.” One of the banjo players suggested that Lanty Molloy, owner of the Peninsula's historic Molloy's Tavern, might be willing to give them a room for their song.

The legendary Lanty Molloy, a community giant who passed in June of 2012 at the age of 79, gave those banjo players a place to play — every Friday night in his taven's banquet room. For 18 years straight, the San Francisco Banjo Club played that gig. Then came a brief interlude, while the band juggled gigs all over the Bay Area. But they came back to Molloy's, first Saturday night of the month, every month. Some members of the Molloy audience go back with the band, to a time before any of the current band members played with SFBB. And given that two of the current band players have been with SFBB for over 25 years — musical director and banjo player Bill Portman and banjo player Jack Burrous — that's saying something.

On July 6, the *Peninsula Progress* decided it was time to go have a listen. Of course the first thing you've got to do at Molloy's on a Saturday night, is give the bartender and proprietor, Owen Molloy, youngest son of Lanty and Blandid Doyle Molloy, a big hello. Then if you are someone who enjoys a nice Guinness draught, have a look at what is topping the “head” on your brew — and that would be a shamrock. How Mr. Owen Molloy came to know how to do that, is a secret he is not giving away, other than to mention he learned it in Ireland.



JEAN BARTLETT PHOTO

The right half of the banjo band is caught playing, “It's A Sin To Tell A Lie”

Next step: Carry your beverage of choice through the friendly crowd at the bar, past a phenomenal framed collection of historic prints and newspaper fronts of San Francisco and California in the headlines, and pull up a seat in the banquet room. The San Francisco Banjo Band hits the banjo strings — and the brass instruments, the zithers, the gutbuckets (a handcrafted string bass), the washboard, train whistles, cowbells, a 1930s Royal Typewriter, and sometimes an accordion and more — at 7 pm. The band currently has 20 musicians, and 16 of them also do vocals. Portman explained in an earlier interview that the band's repertoire rolls through a parade of American music.

“We've got Broadway, Vaudeville, Roaring 20s, the Swing Era, Country Western and Rock 'n' Roll,” the music director said.

“Where we go in an evening depends on the audience. If the audience is mostly a listening bunch, we select the songs accordingly. However, if they are a ‘howling at the moon’ group — well then, we pull out all the stops. When the band gets ready to play at Molloy's, we really have no idea what will unfold. We're certainly a resilient and adaptive bunch!”

Included among the songs played on July 6, with the audience singing along on just about every tune, were “Alexander's Ragtime Band,” “It's A Long Way To Tipperary,” “I'm Gonna Sit Right Down And ‘Type’ Myself A Letter,” “(Won't You Come Home) Bill Bailey,” “The Marines' Hymn,” “I'm An Old Cowhand (From The Rio Grande),” “Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue,” “At The Hop” and “White Cliffs Of Do-



JEAN BARTLETT PHOTO

SFBB band member Terry Horner swings it out on the gutbucket.

ver.” Especially nice to note, while the people who knew about this band got there early and pulled up a chair, once the band got going, the crowd from the bar headed on in for a closer listen, many then sang along, and all joined in on some serious foot tapping. It's easy to love listening to this band. They offer fine, sentimental, easy-on-the-ears old-time music with the kind of

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## BANJO

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musicianship that just says “ah!”

Portman said the band loves every gig, but for him, the one that still stands out the most is the one that took place two months after he started playing with the band.

“Two young ladies, who may have spent too much time on the bar side at Molloy’s, came in where we were playing and started dancing away,” Portman recalled. “They lost (their) step and stumbled, crashed and wiped out the center section of the band. There were banjos, stands, stand lights, music books and pages all over the place. It was a wonderful happening, depending on who you talk to. As for me, I figured this

is the band for me.”

The San Francisco Banjo Band has been referred to as “the Bay Area’s Best Kept Secret.” Besides Molloy’s, included among the venues they’ve played are the Pacifica Community Center, the Pacifica Arts and Heritage Council (now Pacifica Performances), the Sacramento Banjo Festival and the Mariposa Hunter’s Point Yacht Club (San Francisco). They’ve also played for the San Francisco Giants, for various convention center events, and at quite a number of senior centers, assisted living facilities and nursing homes. The majority of the band mates are senior citizens and

they come from all over the Bay Area – Half Moon Bay, Vallejo, Walnut Creek, El Sobrante, Lafayette, the mid-Peninsula and Los Gatos.

“Although most, if not all songs we play are from a bygone or fading era, our mission is to preserve and promote music that was an integral part of the history of American Music,” Portman said, before adding, “and to do so on an instrument said to be truly American, the banjo.”

The band, which is full of silliness and tall tales, including introducing one of their singers more than once as Tab Hunter, has no plans of ever hanging up their banjos.

“As long as the band keeps deciding to

show up is how long the band will continue to play,” Portman said.

The San Francisco Banjo Band plays the first Saturday of the month, every month, from 7:00 pm to 9:30ish, at Molloy’s Tavern, 1655 Old Mission Rd., across the street from Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma. No cover charge, though a little support in the tip jar wouldn’t hurt anyone’s feelings. Talented banjo players who think they might have what it takes to join the band should email [sfbanjoband@yahoo.com](mailto:sfbanjoband@yahoo.com) or phone 650-333-4720. Visit the band’s website at [www.sfbanjoband.com](http://www.sfbanjoband.com).