

## Mixing it up and playing out

Young musicians are melding genres, styles



Sierra Hull, a 17-year-old mandolin player and singer from Tennessee, says she believes this new folk movement is appealing to younger fans.

By [Scott Alarik](#)

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Is there about to be a changing of the guard in folk music? Something exciting is definitely happening: The face of folk seems suddenly both younger and more, well, folksy than at any time since the early 1960s.

Club Passim manager Matt Smith says that 10 years ago, people first discovering the coffeehouse tended to be in their mid- to late-20s. Now it's late-teens to early 20s. And there are many more young folk bands playing the club.

"We are much less songwriter-oriented today than combo- and band-oriented," he says. "People aren't just sitting around alone, writing their songs. They're collaborating, having fun playing music together. And when they do that, they get more tradition-based. You see a bunch of solo songwriters forming bands, and you know they're all going trad."

Alison Brown is a Grammy-winning banjoist whose urbane sound travels so well she's appearing at both the Podunk Bluegrass Festival and Rockport Chamber Music Festival (July 2, [www.rockportmusic.org](http://www.rockportmusic.org)). She also runs Compass Records, a hip boutique label that ranges from bluegrass to Celtic to jazz.

"There are definitely more new folk bands than there have ever been," she says. "And there seem to be more young people getting interested in the music. But I'm really not sure if that's because there's a big new wave, or just that the technology makes it easier to find the music and to make records."

David Jacobs-Strain, 25, a sizzling blues-rooted guitarist-songwriter, thinks many young folkies, like him, grew up around the music as the kids of boomer folkies.

During the lean years after the commercial folk revival, folk developed a missionary zeal from which it is now greatly benefiting. Festivals exposed people like Jacobs-Strain to the vast universe of folk styles, what he calls "the bigger world of handmade music." And young people found it tantalizingly easy to learn from stars they admired at summer workshops, music camps, and from instructional videos.

"By the time I was in middle school," says Jacobs-Strain, who plays at Johnny D's on July 21, "a lot of other kids were listening to grunge and alternative rock. But that all seemed kind of meaningless to me, something distant that was made in a studio. Folk felt more real."

Tennessee bluegrass prodigy Sierra Hull, 17, who performs at the Lowell Folk Festival, is a sparkling mandolinist and singer. Like Jacobs-Strain, she discovered the music at festivals and started to play when she was 8. She loved jamming with adults, and local bands often invited her on stage, "even when all I could do was chop along."

"It was such a fun way to meet new people, learn new things, and get encouragement from people you really admire," she says. "Bluegrass is like a big family that way, a very sweet environment to grow up in."

She says the availability of folk music on the Internet is also drawing new young fans: "Lots of kids my age just like being different and don't listen to commercial music. You know, it's like, 'Everybody likes that, so I'm not gonna.' "

Smith says that's indicative of what's happening on a broader level.

"Genre doesn't matter so much anymore, because the industry really doesn't matter anymore. When you're not dealing with radio formats or big record labels that much, the question of who plays what isn't so important," Smith says. "People don't care who's

bluegrass and who's pop and who's trad. They just want to play together, inspire each other, and find new ways of making music. And when you get right down to it, that's folk music more than anything, isn't it?"■

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