



**BILL KEITH'S BICENTENNIAL BLUEGRASS BAND
SACRE COEUR, PARIS**

BY PATRICK CIOCCA

TONY RICE, BILL AMATNEEK, BILL KEITH, DAVID GRISMAN, DAROL ANGER

Paris Remembers

We drove through the Normandy region of France in June of 1984. This was the very month that France was joyously celebrating the fortieth anniversary of her Allied liberation from the Nazis.

I've loved France since I first visited there as a teenager, and I've always had a mysterious attraction to this period of her history. So I was delighted that we arrived at a number of her towns and cities as their celebrations were just heating up. Each had suffered a unique war experience, and each remembered with a fitting commemoration.

What was unique about the occupation of Paris, was how viciously the Nazis treated the Parisian citizenry. If someone from the French underground were to assassinate a German soldier on the streets of Paris, the Nazis would gather around that point immediately, round up the next dozen Parisians they found — men, women, young, old, it didn't matter — line them up against a wall, and mow them down.

So it is their very *moment* of liberation from this gruesome occupation that Parisians deliriously commemorate.

The week we were there the French government projected period documentaries on blank building walls throughout Paris. They all showed footage of the American troops — us Yanks — marching into The City in 1944 while the Parisians mobbed them, threw flowers at them, threw themselves at them, in joy and thanks.

But for us Yanks, in 1984, Paris had forgotten.

We were shortchanged and treated rudely, many times. This Parisian chill is well-known to American tourists; it seems to come with the wine.

. . .

Tony Rice was the guitarist in our ensemble which was officially named the Bicentennial Bluegrass Band. But Tony dubbed it the “Keith Unit,” after our leader, the brilliant banjoist, Bill Keith. Bill created a style of melodic banjo-picking so distinctive that it is named after him: “Keith Picking.” Darol Anger played fiddle, David Grisman, mandolin, and myself, string bass.

Tony of course picked the flat-top guitar; that is, he played his 1934 Herringbone Martin D-28 with a flatpick or plectrum. These days most flatpicks are made of celluloid. At their cheapest, music stores buy them by the gross, stamp them with their logos, and give them away to their customers.

But Tony used tortoiseshell picks. The French call them “*des vraies médiateurs en écaille*,” true shell picks, and they are the choice of discerning flat-pickers who love the unique tone they produce and who can afford them.

Tortoiseshell picks are made from the shell of the Hawksbill turtle, which is an endangered species. The sale of “tortoise” is banned in most countries and the world supply has dried up as prices have spiraled. Tortoise fans actively

seek out what is left of the world stash. It's an underground matter and sales are usually cash.

We dogged tortoise wherever we toured. In Paris we asked all our friends and local musicians for leads. One of them suggested that a certain gypsy band at a local carnival had good possibilities.

It was a traveling carnival and it took us two days to catch up with them at a flea market in a working class suburb. The band was led by a genuine-looking, walleyed, oud player. (An oud is an Arabian lute.)

Sure enough, he used a flatpick: a rhinestone-encrusted, orange dayglow plastic job, stamped with a "Paris Musique" logo.

The guitarist, who sported a Jimmy Hendrix knee bandana and a three-day old shave, used white, oversized, plastic picks which he hand-cut from tourist credit cards. He swore to me that he pick-pocketed them for that purpose alone.

The day following this disappointment, a French friend, Mary-Paul, directed us to an address in a shabby, residential *arrondissement*. There was no sign on the street indicating a music store might be down the small alley. We barely squeezed inside the place. In the cool dark it had the smell of horsehide glue, varnish, and rosin dust.

The *propriétaire*, a gentlemen in his late 60s, hurried to turn on the light for us. The bare bulb revealed over twenty mandolins, lutes, and guitars lining the walls, most of pre-war vintage. The mandolins, the speciality of the shop, were all of the Italian, bowl-backed shape. "Tater bugs," we call them down South, for the way they look.

This joint was authentic. Bill Keith and I were our French-speaking spokesmen.

[continued in the book ...]