

Seldom Scene Returns to the Red Fox Inn

By Randy Barrett



Who says you can't relive the past? The Seldom Scene will return to the Red Fox Inn on October 20, 2013. The event offers a rare opportunity to hear the band – and former members Tom Gray and John Starling – in the place it became famous.


Let's dial the time machine back to Tuesday January 4, 1972 in Bethesda, MD. The half-filled restaurant slouched toward night as patrons sipped beer, chatted and idly waited to hear what the band had to offer.

What they got that evening was a musical lightning bolt. Most of the members of the newly-formed group were well known to bluegrass fans in Washington: John Duffey, Tom Gray, Ben Eldridge, Mike Auldridge and a new-to-town singer named John Starling. From the very first song, those in attendance understood they were in the midst of the extraordinary.

The band earned \$90 that first night. "We were error prone," recalls banjoist Ben Eldridge. The plan to charge a \$2 cover for future shows struck him as excessive. "I thought, who wants to pay that to hear us?" Everybody, as it turned out.

Within three weeks, the line to hear the Seldom Scene stretched out the door of the Red Fox Inn.

The Red Fox was already a bluegrass hotspot by then. Emerson and Waldron had opened the door for the music at the club in 1967 and anchored a weekly gig there. The bar also hosted national bands, including the Country Gentlemen, Osborne Brothers, Reno and Harrell, Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mt. Boys, the Bluegrass Cardinals and the Lewis Family.



But the Seldom Scene was different. With its fresh material, arresting vocal blend and the unique instrumental voices of Eldridge, bassist Tom Gray and Dobroist Mike Auldridge, the band came from a fundamentally alternative place. “Duffey had two rules,” says Starling. “No big [ego] deals. And we’re not going to play ‘Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms’ over and over.”

Not taking itself too seriously quickly endeared the Seldom Scene to its growing fan base. “We interacted,” Starling explains. “It was like a fraternity party. We made fun of each other.”

One regular was Dick Youmans, who spent so much time at the club he became known as “The Mayor” of the Red Fox. “It was kind of a joke,” says Youmans. “As time wore on, I took it as a privilege and an honor.”

Like many others sitting beside him, Youmans was a musician who came to witness the Scene’s weekly show as much for education as enjoyment. “The Red Fox was definitely a picker’s bar,” he says. It was common for players to gather in the underground garage behind the club and pick far into the night. Local police would stop by in their cruisers, roll down the windows and listen.

Mandolinist Akira Otsuka haunted the Red Fox during the 70s and performed there regularly. “It was a tiny place but when the Scene was playing it was packed. The first table was usually occupied by their wives: Betty Eldridge, Nancy Duffey, Elise Auldridge, Sally Gray and Fayssoux Starling,” he says.

The Seldom Scene became an important anchor for the renaissance of bluegrass music in the Washington, DC area. Dozens of bands performed at local roadhouses and bars seven days a week around the beltway. Scene members were equally enthusiastic about playing and it was common for most of the group to retire after a Red Fox show to Ben Eldridge’s house nearby where they would pick and sing until 4am.

As the band’s (and the club’s) fame grew, the Red Fox became a must-stop watering hole for professional musicians touring through the DC area. That included such luminaries as Linda Ronstadt, Tony Rice, Ricky Skaggs, Roland White, Del McCoury, Sam Bush and John McEuen.

Tom Gray recalls the night McEuen lit fireworks taped to the headstock of his banjo for a big finale. The peg head proceeded to catch on fire, causing the startled (addled?) McEuen to race into the audience and douse the flames in a nearby pitcher of beer.

DC native Emmylou Harris sat in with the Scene regularly and later fronted her own group at the club. Her weekly gig there ended when Harris insisted she receive the same pay as the popular bluegrass band. Walt Broderick, the late owner of the Red Fox, refused and Harris packed up, never to return.

The Red Fox continued to serve as ground zero for the Washington bluegrass community. Other locally based bands, including Country Store, Grass Menagerie, Stars and Bars and None of the Above filled in the weekly music calendar around the Seldom Scene.

In 1977, the band received an offer from the Birchmere club to become its exclusive Thursday-night attraction. The Alexandria restaurant was both bigger and had a professional sound system. Broderick, was offered the chance to counter the pay raise but couldn’t match it. The Seldom Scene’s last show at the club was September 22. Sadly, without the weekly draw of the celebrated group, proceeds waned and the Red Fox Inn closed its doors that same year.

On October 20, expect an evening of great music, laughs and recollections at the former location of the Red Fox: Positano Ristorante, 4948 Fairmont Ave in Bethesda, MD. Seating is limited. Tickets are available [online](#). The ticket price includes dinner and is partially tax deductible. All proceeds benefit the nonprofit [DC Bluegrass Union](#).