

AMGuSS 1986-2026, A Brief History

By Marilyn Mair, AMGuSS Founder & Director

This coming June 2026 will mark the 40th and final year for my *American Mandolin & Guitar Summer School*. So I've written a brief wrap-up of our run, a tip of the hat to the persistence of this delightful annual event, one that planted seeds for the growth of classical mandolin in the USA, and in chamber music worldwide. When AMGuSS began there were no classical mandolin summer schools in the USA or Europe, and CMSA was just a gleam in Norman Levine's eye. How and why did AMGuSS begin? Why did it last for so long?

"I first came to AMGuSS in 1998 and have attended almost every year since. What keeps me coming back, aside from the various fun & social aspects, is just how much musical progress I make every time I come. It's the most musically intense camp I've attended. There is small ensemble work, orchestra work, nightly concerts, nightly jam sessions, and private lessons are available to those that want them. It's really hard to beat all that hands-on work." – Paul Ebersman, Colorado.

The Why: I started AMGuSS with guitarist, Mark Davis, as a tribute to our beloved local teacher, Hibbard Perry. Mr. Perry was my first mandolin teacher, and shortly after I started lessons he revived his *Providence Mandolin Orchestra*, a competition winning group, dormant for several decades. I was lucky to have Hibbard's guidance as I began, for he instilled a versatile technique and an appreciation for incorporating tone color variation. This stood me in good stead when I furthered my mandolin studies in Europe, with Vincenz Hladky, Takashi Ochi, Sigfried Behrend, Hugo D'Alton, and Guiseppe Anneda. As I began to dream of expanding classical mandolin in America, I wanted Mr. Perry's ideas to be known beyond Rhode Island.



The Inspiration: In the late 1970s, our Mair-Davis Duo participated in a week of rehearsals and concerts with the *Deutsches Zupforkester*, the German National Plucked String Orchestra. Then in the early 1980s, we performed for English composer and guitarist Jack Duarte's *Cannington Guitar Summer School*. These were intense music teaching/rehearsal weeks that also promoted student-faculty camaraderie through group meals and informal evenings of music, conversation, and beer. We also coached a Swedish youth orchestra for a week in 1982, where a musicologist spoke of the episodic nature of mandolin popularity —interest was piqued by traveling virtuosos, amateur musicians flocked to mandolin teachers, new music was written, and suddenly everything would disappear until the next revival. I quietly determined that disappearance would not happen on my watch.



The Beginning: In 1983, I helped organize "A Festival of Mandolins," in Rhode Island, along with the *Providence Mandolin Orchestra*. Guest Artists included Yasuo Kuwahara (*Japan*) and Andy Statman, the weekend featured workshops and concerts, and drew participants from as far away as New York City. But I wanted more! So 3 years later, AMGuSS was born. I got permission to hold the event on the campus of Roger Williams University, in Bristol, Rhode Island, where I was a professor, and about a dozen students signed up. Hibbard conducted the orchestra that added in members of the PMO, and Mark, Hibbard, and I filled the days with workshops, chamber music, and technique classes. [Festival logo – Catherine Hawkes]



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"I arrived at AMGuSS in 1995 with my best friend father in tow. For so many of us, AMGuSS is where our musical education took flight. It was total immersion, rigorous and exacting (sprinkled with doses of humor, wit and laughter), orchestrated by educators who were also world renowned musicians. AMGuSS never stopped being a chance to learn and grow musically. For me, the yearly return also became a homecoming." – Judith Fallat, New Jersey.

The beginning of AMGuSS was also notable for my introduction to a mysterious person I found sleeping on a couch in the dorm lobby on the second day. Norman Levine had heard about what we were doing and drove up to see for himself. What he found convinced him to realize his long-held dream – the *Classical Mandolin Society of America*. He asked our Duo to help get it off the ground, and we were integrally involved in CMSA conventions for the next couple of decades. Meanwhile, AMGuSS continued yearly, with enrollment growing to over 50, although I later capped it at 35 to facilitate our chamber music focus.

"AMGuSS is a community of lifelong friends and wonderful musicians who gather every June to make music and magic. I am so grateful to have been part of it since 2001." – John Penoyar, Vermont.



How We've Grown: Soon, due to increasing enrollment, AMGuSS added faculty and a concert series. Ralph Costanza (mandolin, and co-director), Bob Sullivan (conductor, guitar), Bob Martel (guitar, composition), Adam Larrabee (mandolin, mandocello), Bob Asprinio (mandolin, bass) Catherine Hawkes (conductor, mandola), Charlie Moser (mandolin, guitar), and Fran Rivkin (mandolin, camp coordinator) joined me in the ensuing years, creating a yearly faculty of 4 or 5 who

performed, coached chamber music, gave workshops, and were section leaders in the orchestra. Our *American Mandolin & Guitar Concert Series* at first showcased local professional performers, but soon we added Guest Artists, who were in residence for the whole week. We featured American performers, adding in a few international friends. Artists have included: Evan Marshall, Barry Mitterhoff, Gertrud Weyhofen & Michael Troester (*Germany*), Simon Mayor & Hillary James (*England*), Butch Baldassari, Masayuki Kawaguchi (*Japan*), Radim Zenkl, Neil Gladd, Judy Handler & Mark Levesque, Luiz Simas (*Brazil*), Andrew Mah (*Canada*), Matt Flinner, The New England Mandolin Ensemble, Choro das 3 (*Brazil*), and Chris Acquavella (*Germany*).

"After becoming dissatisfied with banging on guitars for a number of years I needed a new musical interest. First I found an old photo of an early mandolin orchestra. Then I found Norman Levine who led me to the Mair Davis Duo. They said, 'Come to our Summer School.' And I found what I'd been looking for." – Ralph Costanza, student 1989-1991, faculty since 1992.

What We've Done: AMGuSS is still the only summer school with both a student-faculty orchestra and chamber-music coaching for every student, along with workshops, a concert series, and the option of private lessons. My goal for the week is always to improve students' musicianship, to show how to think in terms of a whole piece of music and its impact on the audience, beyond simply figuring out how to play the right notes. AMGuSS has traditionally taken place mid-June at Roger Williams University, in Bristol, Rhode Island, with an occasional move to different locations (Newport, Providence, New Hampshire, Maine), or long-weekend sessions, but even through the pandemic AMGuSS persevered.



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"After many years of hearing about AMGuSS, I was finally able to attend the 2021 post-pandemic event, limited to fewer attendees, and held over a long weekend in a Providence hotel. Even that abridged version, where I got to know the 'regulars' by their eyes since we were all wearing masks, was enough for me to realize what I'd been missing. Better late than never." – Nancy King, Georgia.

AMGuSS Extras: There are many special aspects to AMGuSS beyond the orchestra, chamber-music coaching, and workshops. One of the reasons people return year after year is the improvement they see in their playing, their confidence, and their understanding of the music they play. But another reason is the camaraderie, the supportive environment of folks always ready to lend a hand to a newbie, to draw the timid into after-hour jams, to sight-read duets, to chat about life and music while sipping a drink, or even playing cribbage. Bonds are formed that continue to bear fruit the other 51 weeks of the year.

"I attended my first AMGuSS in 2004. The week was great – a total immersion in music! As we were getting ready to leave, I asked another camp participant, now close friend, 'Are you coming back next year?' His response was 'Of course. I'm a lifer.' I became a 'lifer' too." – Lou Chouinard, Minnesota.

In the early 1990s, Norman Levine initiated the "Hibbard Perry Memorial Scholarships" that provide AMGuSS tuition for students aged 18-30 who audition for their spots. After Norman died, I continued to offer the scholarships, with support from AMGuSS students who donate to the scholarship fund. We have had many memorable scholarship students pass through our week. One especially noteworthy, was a scholarship recipient who was the student of a previous scholarship winner. And so the wheel turns.



"After my AMGuSS experience, three separate musician friends asked me what I'd done there because I'd clearly advanced a level in my playing since returning from camp. My experience at AMGuSS was a gift of knowledge I am still unpacking." – Julia Illana, scholarship student 2023, North Carolina.



Another distinctive aspect of AMGuSS is the inclusion of Brazilian music along with classical repertoire. I began my first of many stays in Rio de Janeiro in 2007, to learn the nuances of Choro music, play in local *rodas* (Choro sessions), record with my band, and to finally become "*bem brasileira*" ("truly Brazilian," to quote my Brazilian music colleagues) as a player and composer of this beautiful style. Naturally Brazilian Choro soon worked its way into AMGuSS. I arrange a Choro for the orchestra each year, and include a Brazilian chamber ensemble and workshops, something else that makes AMGuSS unique. Choro is

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a sophisticated contrapuntal style with a distinctive sound, and I've been happy to help AMGuSS-ers learn more about playing this amazing genre of music.

Our student-faculty orchestra, *The American Mandolin & Guitar Orchestra*, has given annual concerts on the RWU campus, at nearby historical venues, and as part of the celebrated WaterFire in Providence. My octet, Enigmatica, has been the AMGuSS Ensemble-in-Residence since 2001, adding another layer of musicianship to the week.



And then there are the original T-shirts that Antonia Carlyon, an AMGuSS student from 1986 on and a PMO member, hand-painted for each session. Some of her images now adorn AMGuSS tote bags, and many of my own original Antonia T's have been incorporated into an AMGuSS quilt, begun by Antonia and completed by Catherine Hawkes in 2024.

The End of an Era: What's in store for our final AMGuSS session? Previous faculty have promised to return for our last hurrah, the orchestra will play pieces composed by Bob Martel and Adam Larrabee to celebrate earlier AMGuSS anniversaries, and I'm writing a new piece to celebrate our finale. We'll also bring back a piece from our first year, and some fan favorites. The dates for our final AMGuSS week are June 15-20, 2026. You'll find more information and a Registration Form on my website at: www.MarilynnMair.com.



One of my favorite AMGuSS memories is from my first day teaching in 2017. I took over conducting the *American Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra* from Bob Sullivan, and I was concerned about how the change would be received. Bob was such a supremely skilled musician and conductor, so beloved, and – of course – so entertaining. When I confessed I had been a little worried, a few members commented that they had been a little worried, too, then someone piped up, 'But we didn't know you were funny.' Everything was pretty smooth sailing from then on." – Catherine Hawkes, faculty.



What's Next?: Lots of mandolin camps have sprung up in the USA and abroad in the past 40 years, and CMSA continues to thrive. After 4 decades, and hundreds of students who've passed through or stuck around, I'll be sad to let go of the reins. But when I look back at the longevity of this annual event that I was inspired to start and persisted in running, I will mostly be proud. And though I'm ending AMGuSS as a summer school, in the fall of 2026, we'll morph into the *American Mandolin & Guitar Suitcase Seminars*, ready to lend our expertise to help with your events. Interested? Contact me for details.

Photos: 1) Hibbard Perry, AMGuSS, 1986. 2) Mair-Davis Duo, 1980s. 3) Program cover, 1983. 4) AMGuSS, 2004. 5) AMGuSS, 2017. 6) AMGuSS, 2023. 7) Agua no Feijão, Rio, 2009. 8) AMGuSS, 2018. 9 & 10) AMGuSS, 2024. 11) Marilynn Mair, 2025. 12) AMGuSS, 2025.

