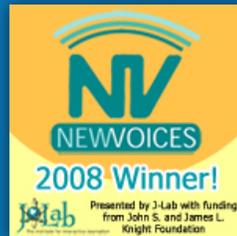


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Delfest Finds Home at Allegany County Fairgrounds

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Written by Kelley Rae

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Editor's Note: The Appalachian Independent received three submissions documenting Delfest in early October. We decided to hold all stories until tickets for the 2009 event became available. We are happy to announce that tickets for Delfest 2009 are on sale now at www.delfest.com. This is the first in a series of Delfest stories.



More than just a music festival, Delfest, its organizers, and local organizations make the event serve the community, the region, and the greater good.

Over 3000 to 4000 people per day showed up to the first annual [2008] Delfest this year at the Allegany County Fairgrounds. Even though twice as many were expected, festival promoters feel the event was successful because of the collaborative efforts of the people involved and because of the caliber of musicians who performed.

The Crowd

During the performances, the music echoes off the tall exposed rock of the Potomac Highlands, and every musician who stands up on the stage acknowledges the raw beauty of the setting. In personally choosing the location, none other than festival namesake Del McCoury himself said while visiting the location, "The only thing this place needs is a festival."

The reflection of the music off the majestic cliffs facing the fairgrounds gives the performances a resonance more vibrant than any reverb machine. Geographically rich in history, the location marks the border between West Virginia and Maryland; the Potomac River snakes between them next to the cliffs and the B&O railroad tracks, and during the festival, the concert crowd looks up to the cliffs to see hang gliders jumping off the face.

The vendors are selling muslin dresses, crystal jewelry, various kinds of rocks, and of course tie-dyed t-shirts and clothing. There are nonprofits such as Rock the Earth advocating conservation and ecology. There is food from all regions, including Mexican, Mediterranean, and Cajun, and there is vegetarian. And of course there is beer - lots of beer - even microbrews such as Censored Ale from Laguintas Brewing, a California outfit whose slogan is "Beer speaks, people mumble." This seems appropriate since the crowd is well-behaved, leaving the already rather inconspicuous security personnel mostly unneeded. Still, perhaps based on wisdom from performing for decades, McCoury cautions the staff to be kind and polite in regards to the festival-goers.



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People have staked their claim of ground with brightly colored umbrellas that speckle the landscape along with festival chairs and beiderlack blankets or quilts, and those stakes are honored. When folks are up getting a beer or using the facilities, bystanders are welcomed to sit for a spell without fear of reprisal. The seats are relinquished upon the owners' return. Straw has been placed down on the wet ground because of the recent rains and the smell of it is a perfect companion to the event.

Moving in and out of the crowd are Deadheads with locks, some wearing "man" skirts of muslin. A girl pushes her grandmother along in a wheelchair and skips in time to David Grisman, former member of Old and In the Way (along with the late Jerry Garcia). Mothers in patchwork skirts hula-hoop next to their daughters in Hannah Montana t-shirts, middle-aged men smoke cigars, and college kids dance in the dirt. The crowd is as diverse as the lineup - which ranges from the traditional sounds of Del McCoury to the Sparrow Quartet's eclectic mix of Mandarin old-time (see article) and the Punch Brother's classical movements (also see article). The t-shirts worn feature other monumental festivals like Telluride, Merlefest, and Bonaroo, which suggests that the summertime festival-goers are including Delfest on their circuit. People smile and dodge the hoops, blankets, and chairs as they walk through, while further down the field there are softball tosses from father to son while a young man in a multi-colored cape is grooving to Grisman's mandolin.



On one hand, David Grisman's playing keeps getting better, if that is at all possible, and on the other hand, he hasn't changed in the last twenty

years. His white, long hair blows in the seventy degree wind that brushes the crowd and keeps the sweat drying on their skin. It was Grisman who placed a mandolin in Del's son, Ronnie McCoury's, hands for the first time. Ronnie has since earned best mandolin player awards from 1993 to 2000. Two other Delfest musicians, Chris Thile of Punch Brothers and Sam Bush, have also won the award. Stan Strickland, head of McCoury Music, says the eclectic line-up of the festival has one commonality: they all have a deep connection to Del McCoury. This passing of the mandolin is one of those connections. Interestingly, David Grisman said Delfest was the best festival he has ever been to, a colossal compliment considering he has played them all for over 20 years and in nearly every state.

Sam Bush echoed Grisman's sentiment, volunteering to come back every year. Formerly of the New Grass Revival and fellow band member of Béla Fleck's, Bush played to perfection rock, jazz, and an avant-garde fusion of sounds that at some points were reminiscent of Jethro Tull, but when he played "Riding that Bluegrass Train" just as the train went by in the hollow and blew its horn, the entire audience got up and started dancing. And of course, "The River's Gonna Run" had special significance while the music played near the flowing Potomac. It doesn't get any better than that.

McCoury's Commitment to Music

Del McCoury's dedication to music is what led him to sponsor a musical festival; he has wanted to do it for years. Although he says he plays "hard core bluegrass," McCoury is dedicated not only to traditional music but to new forms of music that emerge from the interplay of traditional forms with young musicians. McCoury respects and nurtures those younger musicians and their experimentation with forms - forms that are born of these kinds of music festivals. Much collaboration happens backstage and during jams, of which lasting liaisons are created, providing a forum for world-class musical collaborations which often evolve into such musical successes as Sparrow Quartet. Another part of McCoury's commitment to young and upcoming musicians entails a Bluegrass competition, and this year's winner, The Vinegar Creek Constituency from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, will play as an act at the festival next year as part of their winning status.

The festival's VIP tickets give the serious fan the opportunity of witnessing late night indoor performances, including picking sessions, special guest sit-ins, jam sessions, and of interacting with their favorite artists, not to mention close to the stage seating areas. With informal workshops emphasizing performance rather than instruction, and a variety of music-related activities for children, festival-goers have plenty of chances to get their fill of their favorite artists.

Cumberland was handpicked by Del McCoury not only because of its beauty, but also because of its proximity to his home: York, Pennsylvania. While North Carolina-born, McCoury considers York home because that is where he and his family live and where all his children were born. After searching the web for possible locations, one of his top

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choices was the Cumberland Fairgrounds. Roy Carter of High Sierra Music, who partners with McCoury music, then visited the fairgrounds and met with Glenn Stahlman, Allegany County Fairgrounds Sales Director. Once they met and settled a game plan for the event, the deal was sealed. Stahlman says the fairgrounds handle over 300 events a year and that the Delfest folks were the easiest people they have ever worked with. In fact, Stahlman says, Delfest has the potential of being a mega event because of the quality of the people involved and that it offers an economical and cultural boost to the area. Stan Strickland from McCoury Music was equally as magnanimous as Stahlman when it came to doling out compliments. Strickland said that they lost a bit of money but would not let that stop them from planning next year's festival. In fact, pre-planning has already begun, and local sponsors have already asked for more advanced tickets to sell.

Allegany County Chamber Of Commerce worked in conjunction with High Sierra Music to enlist their constituency to volunteer by offering tickets and t-shirts as an incentive, but according to President Barb Buehl, they soon had to stop taking volunteers because of the recruitment success rate. Both organizations (McCoury Music and High Sierra) feel that it is essential to give back to the communities that welcome them and because of the volunteers they received through the chamber, McCoury Music was able to save over \$5,000 that they then offered to nonprofit organizations for the homeless: Restoration of the Heart and the Union Rescue Mission.

Restoration of the Heart is a faith-based, transitional housing organization committed to preventing homelessness. However, its treasurer, Wade Clark, sometimes lacked faith nonlocal, traveling business ventures because of past situations where his constituents were not paid fairly. In the case of Delfest, not only were the workers paid in a timely fashion but they were paid a wage above the area average. Some workers even chose to give the money back to the organization. In addition, the workers commented on how well the musicians, festival workers, and festival-goers treated them: according to one man, he was treated as if he were family, which says much about Delfest and its coordinators. They have given the area an event that is worth making a tradition of.

DelFest is scheduled for next year on Memorial Day Weekend, May 22-24, 2009 at Allegany County Fairgrounds in Cumberland, Maryland. Tickets are on sale now at www.delfest.com.

Sources

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Wade Clark, Restoration of the Heart, Phone interview

Last Updated on Monday, 12 January 2009 11:31

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