

Folkwax Review

32nd Kerrville Folk Festival 2003, Days 1 to 9 – Hill Country Avalon, Part 1

The Quiet Valley Ranch, *open air* home of the Kerrville Folk Festival since 1974, is located on Highway 16, ten miles South of the Texas Hill Country town of Kerrville. The initial pair of these *family gatherings* took place in the town's Auditorium, however the SRO popularity of those concerts dictated that more space and time was allocated to the event. With the purchase of the Ranch, what began as a three-day long Festival, has, in the past three decades, progressively evolved into an unbroken series of five, eleven and eighteen-day long events. In 1996, Kerrville's 25th anniversary year, Festival founder, Rod Kennedy, put together a twenty-five day programme of music. Mr Kennedy retired last year, and in this year's official programme he is listed as Festival Consultant. The mantle of organising and producing the Festival has passed to his long time assistant Dalis Allen. Having survived years of good and bad weather, which brought fluctuating turnouts, following a recent financial crisis the Festival is aiming, at some future date, to seek Clause 501(c) 3 charity status, a move that should irrevocably secure its future.

Some fifty-acre in size, the ranch boasts two performing areas – Mainstage and Threadgill Memorial Theatre, the latter having been named in memory of the legendary Texas musician and restaurateur. Threadgill Memorial lies within the ranch's campgrounds, which, since late last century has also enjoyed RV facilities. Food and beverages are available within the campgrounds at the Kerrtry Store, and just across the way is Kidsville. Nearby, on the edge of the ranch, is Chapel Hill, a mostly silent and sacred place to Festival regulars where the first *official* musical event, the Ballad Tree Song Sharing takes place at 3.00pm every Thursday [Day 1] immediately preceding Memorial Day weekend. To the South of the ranch, on either side of Highway 16, lies vast tracts of land that are used for car parking. For eighteen days, in late May/early June, the Quiet Valley Ranch becomes a self-contained, vibrant and functioning community founded on the tenets of mutual sharing and understanding. *It can be this way always.....*and this Festival is living proof.

For a number of years now, the Festival has operated an aggressively green policy that embraces recycling and minimising human impact on the ranch's environment. For instance, the suspending of tarpaulin screens from the ranch's numerous shade trees gave way many years ago to the use of ground based open sided, metal-framed, canvas topped canopies. Biodegradable materials have also been employed wherever possible for a considerable number of years.

I mentioned earlier that the *first official musical event* takes place at 3.00pm on Memorial Weekend Thursday, but Festival regulars begin arriving on the ranch, to establish camps at long-established and fixed locations, on the afternoon of the previous Sunday. Known affectionately as *Land Rush*, the choice camping spots among the ranch's shade trees – mostly live oaks – are the first to be occupied. The Texas sun is mostly set to *blow torch mode* at this time of year and the heat can be relentless and blistering.

Though the main musical thrust of the Festival is the eleven, principally weekend, nights of Mainstage concerts and seven nights of weekday shows – Sundown Concerts - at Threadgill Theatre, the Festival actually plays host to a diverse range of fringe events, *official* and *unofficial*. This report, the first of two that I'll be posting I'll cover Day 1 through Day 9 on the Quiet Valley Ranch.

In the *official* category, and also in the extreme heat of noon to mid-afternoon on the first Saturday and Sunday - Days 3 and 4, the New Folk Concerts take place. The winners of the New Folk Songwriting Competition have consistently, in subsequent years, become Mainstage acts. Rod Kennedy has, justifiably and often, repeated the mantra "*we grow our own crops here.*" Since the initial Competition, circa 1972, the list of New Folk winners has included Eric Taylor ('77), Tish Hinojosa ('79), Lyle Lovett ('82), Pierce Pettis ('86), Buddy Mondlock ('87), Slaid Cleaves ('92), and with Tracy Grammer, Dave Carter ('98).

Initiated by Peter Yarrow, and long a Mainstage event, the New Folk Concerts moved a couple of years ago to the relatively sheltered environs of the Threadgill Theatre – a partly covered area with seating. From a limit of six-hundred, two song recordings, that, this year, saw entries arrive from all fifty states, as well as Canada, England, Germany, Italy and Israel, Dalis Allen chose thirty-two finalists. The Concert

sees the finalists perform the pair of songs on their submission tape. The judges this year, all previous New Folk winners, were the aforementioned Tracy Grammer, and, respectively, from the Classes of '86 and '02, David Roth and Aengus Finnan. Announced late during the Sunday night concert at Mainstage, the third group of winners in, this, the third Millennium AD, were, alphabetically by surname, David Bailey [Earlsville, VA], Colin Brooks [Austin, Tx.], Jonathon Byrd [Carrboro, NC], Rob Heath [Edmonton, Alberta, Ca.], Kathy Hussey [Nashville, Tn.], and Anais Mitchell [Middlebury, VT].

Five of this year's half dozen New Folk contest winners featured in Saturday concert, the exception being Anais Mitchell. Apart from a cash award, the winners also received a portable home studio recording system. Next week I'll report on the Winners Concert that takes place on the Sunday of the second weekend of the Festival [Day 11], where the aforementioned Class of '03 will each perform a twenty five-minute set. Rumours are already circulating on the ranch that some winners may guest on each other's sets. We'll see.....

Well aware of the need to cater for the offspring of Festival regulars, a number of adults peppered the Threadgill audience of youngsters on the Saturday and Sunday of the first weekend for the 3.00 to 5.00pm Children's Concert, and a bill that featured sets by Native American storyteller Gayle Ross, singer/songwriters Lui Collins and Michael McNevin, plus The Red Dirt Rangers. Throughout the Festival, between the hours of 9.00am and 6.00pm, Kidsville – an open side, covered area sees children partake in a wide range of artistic pursuits including creative drama and a talent show.

A one-off event on Memorial Day afternoon, is the two-hour long Blues Concert which this year saw Stephen George, Ernie Hawkins and Mary Flower share the Threadgill stage. Messrs. Flower and Hawkins were joined by Steve James, as the tutors on a three-day long Roots/Blues Guitar Workshop that took place during Days 6 through 8.

During the same three-day period, Mainstage played host to the 24th Annual Songwriting School, an event that was initiated by the late Bob Gibson. Directed by long time Festival attendees, Dr. Dick Goodwin and Nashville based songwriter Rick Beresford, this year's faculty of songwriters included Eric Taylor, Allen Shamblin, Wendy Waldman, Terri Hendrix and Lloyd Maines.

I mentioned The Ballad Tree Song Sharing session earlier in this feature and this two-hour long event is basically an open mic for *all comers*. Hosted each of the Mainstage days by a professional musician, who more often than not opens the session by performing a song, the names of each afternoon's performers are randomly drawn from a hat and those performers range from beginners to published songwriters and touring musicians. The Ballad Tree, a non-competitive event, was initiated at the suggestion of Bobby Bridger, a New Folk winner during the early years of the Festival. "Heal In The Wisdom," written by Bridger, will celebrate its 25th year as the Festival anthem in 2004.

As for *unofficial* events, one takes place on practically every day of the Festival, although I only intend mentioning a few here. On the first Monday [Day 5], there's the Kerrdigras Parade. Ostensibly an opportunity for the youngsters to dress up, adults also join in as they wend their way through the campgrounds giving away strings of multi-coloured beads. Down at Camp CALM, after the Sundown Concert, on the following evening, there's a Poetry Evening that is co-hosted [and was co-founded] by Blair Powell [camp boss at CALM – aka Conroe Association of Live Music] and Tim Mason [poet, and booker at Cambridge venue Passim, and the recently initiated Capo's in Lowell, Mass.]. Late afternoon Thursday [Day 8] sees the Javier Cortez, a Festival regular since its inception, host Fajita Thursday cook-out. This year's cook-out, the twentieth, saw a reunion performance by the original members of Still On The Hill.

If part of Kerrville's legendary status has arisen from the countless New Folk performers who have risen to become national and international recording and touring artists, many of the truly magical musical moments of *the Kerrville experience* come in the dark of night at what is locally called, the campfires. This year a fire ban is in force, yet that didn't prevent musicians of all levels and skills gathering at numerous, long established, listening spots such as Crows Nest [named after Arkansas based musician, Crow Johnson], Camp Stupid, Camp Coho, Camp Duct Tape and more to share songs. Those songs, consistently outstrip what is heard on Mainstage and at Threadgill's and I can report that by Day 9, Boston based Michael Troy's "Jacinta's Song" [from his forthcoming album "**Romancing The Moon**"], Steve Fisher's "Bigger Love" and Chuck Brodsky's "The God Damned Blessed Road" – the latter pair, as

yet unrecorded – have greatly impressed. The truth is that hundred's of other equally impressive, jaw dropping songs have been performed on the ranch, and like life, *catching these moments* simply boils down to being in the right place at the right time. As for songs previously known, at another campfire, Austin based writer/performer, Steve Brooks, sang Dave Carter's "The River Where She Sleeps" accompanied on fiddle by Tracy Grammer, a moment of musical delight that will live in my memory forever. The previous evening, Andrew Calhoun performed a stunning version of "When I Have Arms Again" from his most recent disc **"Tiger Tattoo."**

Off ranch, on each weekend, campers can partake in a couple of activities, requiring varying degrees of physical prowess. Hosted by Mainstage performer, and 1979 New Folk winner, Bill Oliver aka Mr. Habitat, there's a gentle canoe trip down a short stretch of the Guadalupe River each Friday. At 9.30 the following morning a 26 mile bike ride through the surrounding Texas Hill Country begins. A following vehicle picks up any drop-outs from the bike ride.

Around one-hundred artists perform on the Festival stages over the eighteen day duration, and at least an equivalent number of writers, each capable of furnishing [onstage] entertaining sets of songs, camp on, or visit the ranch during the event.

As for the nine days, to date, of Mainstage and Threadgill concerts, highlights have included, relative newcomers, The Mammals and Johnny Irion and Sarah Lee Guthrie, sharing the stage for a stirring encore rendition of "Rock Island Line" on Day 1. The following evening, Delaware based opener John Flynn, impressed with the politically barbed "The AmBush" [aka "The Death Of The Myth" from his new album **"Dragon"**]. Saturday night saw an impressive opening set by one last year's New Folk winners, Aengus Finnan. Finnan's recordings acknowledge traditional songs, the work of other contemporary writers as well as his own original compositions. In that regard, I'm already certain that future years will see this young man's work acknowledged in the same breath as his *heroes and countrymen*, Gordon Lightfoot and the late Stan Rogers. Following a set of songs filled with risqué humour from Eric Schwartz, and suitably dressed for the part, he/she took the part of Meatloaf's female *alter ego* during DaVinci's Notebook rendition of the spoof, "Pull My Finger." Proving that [my] wishes [occasionally] do come true, later that evening, Susan Werner's encore included the spiritually uplifting "May I Suggest To You," while "Sorry About Jesus" surfaced earlier in her set. Tracy Grammer's mid Sunday night set included a performance of "The Mountain" to which she appended a Sumarian Chant, also, penned by her late partner. Mid performance, I witnessed Grammer's eyes distracted, for a mere moment, as a large bird flew high above the audience. Her set also included "Gentle Arms Of Eden" with Andrew Calhoun on vocals, and an as yet unreleased Dave Carter tune "Hard To Make It." The *legacy* is in truly caring hands.

Midweek highlight at Threadgill included Michael McNevin's story songs, and an absolutely blistering evening of social and political comment from poet Chris Chandler, underscored by songs from his current performing partner, Anne Feeney [a New Folk winner in 1989]. Back at Mainstage for the second Friday [Day 9], the audience was fooled for a few moments when a Darryl Purpose *look alike* raced onstage to deliver the opening lines of "Mr Schwinn." Purpose has been a performing musician for less than a decade and his catalogue already features five hugely listenable recordings. The same evening, Eric Taylor's set included a stunning rendition, with extra phrases [accompanied, each time, by a wry smile] of "Dean Moriarty," and was followed by equally jaw dropping versions of "Hemingway's Shotgun" and "Chicken Pie." Taylor encored his set with a chilling reading of Dylan's "I Shall Be Released." For his Mainstage performance this year, Peter Yarrow was joined by, daughter Bethany and, his old trio partner, Noel Paul Stookey. As usual, Yarrow's set featured a rendition of "Puff The Magic Dragon" complete with the customary stage invasion by an army of pre-teens. Nine days in Avalon may have already passed, but my glass remains half full.....

to be continued

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikles 06/03.
[2233 words]

Photo Captions [See next page]

Kerrville 1 – L to R : Rod Kennedy – Kerrville Festival Founder and Producer [retd.] and Dalis Allen – Current Producer and Empress.

Kerrville 2 – L. to R. - Tracy Grammer with Andrew Calhoun and Donny **Wright** [bass]

Kerrville 3 – New Folk Winners 2003 – L. to R. – Steve Gillette [Compere], Rob Heath, David Bailey, Dalis Allen [Producer/Empress], Kathy Hussey, Anais Mitchell, Colin Brooks, Jonathon Byrd and Rod Kennedy [Founder/Producer [retd.]]

Kerrville 4 – Eric Schwartz performing “Pull My Finger” with DaVinci’s Notebook.

Kerrville 5 – The Mammals [from left Michael Merenda and Ruth Unger and far right, Tao Rodriguez Seeger] with Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion

Kerrville 6 – Aengus Finnan

Kerrville 7 – The annual Peter and “Puff” stage invasion