

# KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL

Forty Years, All For The Sake Of The Song

**R**od Kennedy a teen vocalist for the Bill Creighton Orchestra, ex-Marine and Korean War vet, UT Fine Arts graduate, one-time radio and television station owner, successful sports car racing driver and proprietor of the Chequered Flag, a themed Austin music club, had, since the mid 1950s, promoted well over one thousand music concerts in Central Texas when he received a telephone call during early 1972 from Maury Coats, executive director of the newly formed Texas Commission on the Arts and Humanities, asking if he would organise an evening music festival to run in tandem with the inaugural Texas State Arts & Crafts Fair that was taking place during the day on the campus of the town's Schreiner College. Then forty-two years of age, Kennedy agreed to organise an event. Almost forty years later, that affirmation constitutes a landmark in Texas music history. At the time, little did Mr Kennedy know what his future held...

From June 1 through 3, 1972 the Kerrville Municipal Auditorium (refurbished early in the new millennium and now known as the Kathleen C. Cailloux Center for the Performing Arts) hosted the first Kerrville Folk Festival. Former President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who resided nearby, attended the inaugural event with his wife Ladybird, accompanied by legendary UT football coach Darrell Royal and his wife Edith. By the time the 1973 festival ended, such were the magnitude of the crowds, Rod and his wife Nancy Lee knew the event was fast outgrowing the facilities available in town. The following spring, nine miles south of Kerrville, bordering Highway 16, the Kennedy's purchased a sixty-three acre partially wooded tract of land—the Quiet Valley Ranch. The area located adjacent to the newly constructed mainstage—these days it's called the Kennedy Outdoor Theater—was cleared of scrub by the time the 1974 festival began, although what became the campgrounds wasn't opened to festival attendees until the following year. A legend was taking form...

Based on his experiences at the, then, defunct Newport Folk Festival, in the spring of 1972 Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul & Mary) suggested to Mr. Kennedy that Kerrville should hold a songwriting contest. Kerrville stalwarts know it simply as New Folk. Having entered the inaugural contest Lubbock band the Flatlanders played a 1972 guest mainstage set, on a bill that included appearances by Yarrow, Kenneth Threadgill, Steve Fromholz, Michael (Martin) Murphey, Texas Fever (feat. Ray Wylie Hubbard), Carolyn Hester and the late Allen Damron. Kerrville's New Folk 'winners' (and 'losers') have, in time, become festival mainstage acts. A record of contest entrants and winners, dating from 1972 to date, is maintained at [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp).

Where song contest winners during the early years were mainly Texan or from the southern states, in time national and international winners emerged. It's amazing how fact, over time, becomes fiction. Notable 'winners' from last century who went on to enjoy national and international success include Tom Russell, Eric Taylor, Darden Smith, Kristina Olson, Hal Ketchum, James McMurtry, Slaid Cleaves, Mark Erelli and, sadly, the late great Dave Carter. In the new millennium the New Folk roll of honour already includes Anais Mitchell, Jonathan Byrd, Diana Jones, Devon Sproule, BettySoo and Danny Schmidt. Driven by a marginally heavier musical backbeat, 2003 winner Colin Brooks and 2006 winner Gordy Quist form two-thirds of the Band Of Heathens front line. In a similar national/international vein notable New Folk 'losers' include Steve Earle, Lyle Lovett, Carrie Newcomer and Nanci Griffith. As for New Folk 'winners' who are, for me, largely unsung musical heroes they, would have to, include Texan Steve Fisher (1990) and California's Keith Greeninger (1997).

One of the spin-offs from New Folk is that over the ensuing decades, during festival time, the Quiet Valley Ranch campground became a breeding ground for wannabe roots music songwriters. In the latter regard, Mr Kennedy's mantra during his thirty-year tenure as festival director was: 'We grow our own crops here.' That contention still remains beyond reproach. You want corroboration? The day after winning the (Richardson, Texas)



Photos: © Arthur Wood

Top to bottom:

L. to R. Rod Kennedy (Kerrville Folk Festival founder and producer 1972 – 2002) and Dalis Allan (Festival producer 2003 – to date). Photographed at Threadgill Theatre during the 2003 Kerrville Folk Festival.

L. to R. Terry Buffalo Ware (guitar) and Ray Wylie Hubbard (guitar) during the latter's mainstage set at the 1996 Kerrville Folk Festival.

L. to R. Rod MacDonald, Cindy Mangsen and Jan Marra at mainstage during the 1989 Kerrville Folk Festival, performing a cappella rendition of MacDonald's *Sailors Prayer*.

Bobby Bridger performs at the Native American Tribute Concert, Threadgill Theatre during the 1989 Kerrville Folk Festival.





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Top to bottom:

L. to R. Fats Kaplin (accordion), Tom Russell (guitar) and Andrew Hardin (guitar) during Russell's mainstage set at the 1986 Kerrville Folk Festival. At the far end of the mainstage wearing shorts, the video camera operator is Butch Hancock. Photo © Chris Vallillo

L. to R. Butch Hancock and the late Jesse Taylor perform during a Sundown Concert at the original Threadgill Theatre during the 1989 Kerrville Folk Festival.

L. to R. Eric Taylor (guitar), Steven Fromholz (guitar) and Vince Bell (guitar), aka The Flatliners, during their Sundown Concert set at the 2006 Kerrville Folk Festival

L. to R. In the forefront, the late Allen Wayne Damron and Bobby Bridger, composer of the festival anthem *Heal In The Wisdom*, supported by numerous fans and festival staff, perform the song at the close of the 2003 Kerrville Folk Festival.

2010 Wildflower! Art & Music Festival Song Contest, Pierce Pettis' daughter, Grace, related: 'Attending Kerrville when I was nineteen really changed my writing. I wrote three or four songs there, good songs that appear on my album. Being around all that music made my writing instantly better. I would recommend Kerrville to every young writer. It's like school. It's an education. It's invaluable—you can't pay for that.'

What began as a three-day event increased to four days in 1973, and grew to eleven days by the dawn of the 1980s. As well as the reputation it has justifiably earned and maintained as 'the' songwriter festival, at eleven days duration, it became a unique musical event unmatched anywhere. Kerrville held its first eighteen-day summer festival—aka Big Folk—in 1987. It rained pretty much every day, thankfully Mr. Kennedy decided to stick with the extended duration. Musicians and business associates came to the festival's rescue with a series of fund raising concerts and events that helped defray the accumulating losses. In 1996, celebrating Kerrville's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the event was extended to twenty-five days. While it was touch and go during the final seven days—akin to the *Twilight Zone* with music—I'm proud to say that along with thousands of the faithful I 'kerrvived' the 1996 festival. This year's 40<sup>th</sup> extravaganza will mark a quarter of a century since I first entered the gates of the Quiet Valley Ranch and discovered a musical paradise beyond my wildest dreams.

You may be wondering about the term 'kerrvived' In Kerrville parlance, in 1986 I was a 'Kerrvirgin' When I returned in 1989 I was a 'Kerrvert' You see the festival has acquired a language of its own—constructed around all things 'Kerr'. In my mind Kerrville is a 24/7 musically propelled summer camp for adults of all ages, as well as youngsters. Like I said, paradise.

Let's check some of the festival's other established, mainly musical, events. The Ballad Tree Song Sharing takes place on Chapel Hill, located on the north-western extremity of the campgrounds. Around 1977 Bobby Bridger, composer of the festival anthem *Heal In The Wisdom*, and Tom Paxton, suggested that the festival needed a non-competitive space where beginners through to seasoned professionals could perform their songs. In that regard Ballad Tree perfectly compliments, nay nourishes, New Folk. Normally hosted by a mainstage performer, Ballad Tree is held from 3pm to 5pm on the eleven (weekend) mainstage days. For more years than I guess he would care to remember, starting at 5pm each day on a circle of benches located behind the festival office, festival regular Steve Gillette helms the Texas & Tennessee Song Circle, where writers of all abilities perform their songs and have the melodies and lyrics critiqued by, in my book, a truly legendary American songwriter. It's yet another event that nourishes New Folk.

These days come noon, Saturday and Sunday on the festival's opening weekend, seeking their next song high, the more avaricious listeners among the Kerrville faithful gather at the Kenneth Threadgill Memorial Theatre located in the campgrounds near Chapel Hill for the finals of the New Folk Songwriting Contest. Each day sixteen writers, shortlisted from hundreds of applicants, perform two songs. Three mainstage performers normally comprise the judging panel, and the six annual contest winners are announced midway through Sunday evening's mainstage concert. Mid-day on the second Sunday, the New Folk Winners Concert takes place at Threadgill Theatre with each musician delivering close to a thirty-minute set. Steve Gillette, always armed with a seemingly bottomless pit of lame jokes, and Rod Kennedy compere those events.

At eighteen days duration, the festival coalesced into three mainstage weekends of five, three and three days. The opening weekend begins on a Thursday and always ends on Memorial Day Monday, an American national holiday (in the UK we're enjoying the Whitsun Bank Holiday). The weekend mainstage concerts commence at 7pm and end around midnight. During the (two) intervening mid-week periods, respectively, of three and four days, beginning at 7pm, two-hour long Sundown Concerts are presented at Threadgill Theatre. Sustaining the festival faithful during the mainstage concerts, booths occupied by food vendors (who satisfy carnivores, vegetarians and everyone between) and refreshment vendors (alcoholic/non-alcoholic) bound the rear of the mainstage area. On the hilly western boundary of mainstage, you can purchase an amazing array of products including clothing, jewellery, musical instruments and more. And when the



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mainstage and Sundown concerts end, at numerous locations in the campgrounds amateur players gather with mainstage artists to sing their hearts out until the next sunrise...and, possibly, the one after that. 24/7 the Quiet Valley Ranch becomes a self-contained functioning community. At Kerrville 'the road' goes on forever, and the music never ends...

Compilation albums from each festival were released initially on vinyl and then cassette over the period 1972 to 1991. Throughout that period (and up to 1999), Austin-based Pedro Gutierrez was the festival's recording engineer. For a couple of years no recordings were released, then in the mid-1990s Murray Krugman's Vermont based label Silverwolf Records issued two, ten CD box sets featuring most of the 1972 to 1991 material. Silverwolf did release a 1996 compilation album, followed through to 1999 by a patchwork of themed live highlight releases bearing titles such as THE WOMEN OF KERRVILLE and END OF THE CENTURY. In 2000, helmed by festival regular Tom Roudebush, KAMP (Kerrville Acoustic Music Productions) produced a compilation album. Early in the new millennium the festival's future became uncertain, and the release of recordings ceased until 2004, when, doubtless inspired by the Grateful Dead's marketing of live recordings and with the artist's approval, full mainstage sets were released on CD. Since 2005, festival volunteers with recording industry experience, led by Vern Crawford and Bruce Chandler, have overseen the production of Kerrville's live releases. Those recordings are available for purchase from the festival's web site at [http://www.kerrville-music.com/2010\\_performance\\_cd\\_list.htm](http://www.kerrville-music.com/2010_performance_cd_list.htm)

Rod Kennedy hung up his hat as Festival Producer following the 2002 festival, and his longtime assistant Dalis Allen assumed the mantle. Dalis had attended the first Kerrville Folk Festival. At the time she managed the coffeehouse at University of Houston, and for a couple of decades, come festival time, she would volunteer, then she became a part-time festival employee, and subsequently worked full-time at the Quiet Valley Ranch. Having attended as well as observed the event from the outset, Allen understands Kerrville's 'magic' and while radical physical improvements have taken place on the ranch since 2003, she has not allowed anything to interfere with the 'magic'. These days around eight hundred volunteers keep the festival unobtrusively ticking 24/7. Many volunteers are also musicians and their opportunity to shine comes on the Saturday afternoon of the final weekend when Threadgill Theatre hosts a two-hour long Staff Concert. The Staff 'Rekerrds' Store, located in the campgrounds adjacent to the 'Kerrtry' Store (daily service of hot and cold food and beverages) and 'Kidsville' (a supervised creche), was established in 2003 and allows non-mainstage musicians to sell their recordings. Furthermore, in the campgrounds there's an almost daily series of crazy/celebratory events—the Watermelon Sacrifice, the 'Ker-di' Gras Parade, Saint 'Patterrick's' Day and more...

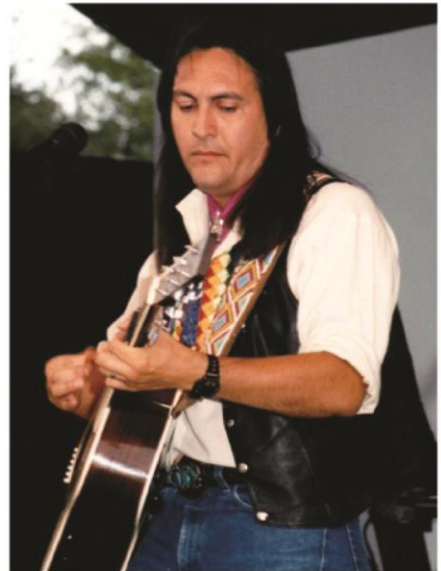
In order to secure the festival's long-term existence, crucially in November 2008, the Kerrville festivals—a three-day Wine & Music Festival aka 'Little Folk' is held annually in early September—were acquired by the Texas Folk Music Foundation, a 501(c)3 Texas Non-profit Corporation. As a result the festival now benefits from public and private tax-free donations. The Texas Folk Music Foundation arranges countless annual events, and further details can be found at <http://tfmf.org/programs.htm>

Before focusing on this year's festival bill, I want to mention one thing close to my heart. Now four decades old, a number of musicians, regular volunteers and attendees have passed on. In 1989 Nancy Lee Kennedy told me: 'I don't think the idea originated with me. I'm sort of an Earth person, and prefer things that live for years and years.' Nancy Lee was referring to the planting of trees in memory of the departed. The first tree was planted on Chapel Hill, followed by many in the open area behind the mainstage seating. The practice subsequently spread to the campgrounds where Kerrville regulars have constructed stone memorials and planted trees.

Friday on this year's opening weekend possesses a clear-cut New Folk flavour with mainstage sets from past winners Buddy Mondlock (1987), Slaid Cleaves (1992), Zoe Lewis (2002) and Jonathan Byrd (2003). The following evening's bill is opened by Susan Werner who will hopefully bring her amazing music to these shores before long, followed by Kenny White, Cheryl Wheeler, and making her third visit to the ranch since 2003 the legendary Judy Collins, while talented 1988 New Folk winner David Wilcox closes. By the close of the fifth day Terri Hendrix, Eliza Gilkyson, Jimmy LaFave and Eric Taylor will have sung their hearts out. This year's opening Sundown Concert includes a screening of the documentary ANDERSON FAIR—FOR THE SAKE OF THE SONG preceded by sets from Eric Taylor, Greg Klyma and others. I've derived great pleasure observing over the past twenty years how 'Kerrverts' have embraced one of America's finest composers, Michael Smith. This year the faithful can enjoy another two undiluted Sundown hours of Michael.

Second weekend brings the annual (birthday) appearance by Peter Yarrow, another Vance Gilbert chuckle-fest, the welcome return of Ma & Pa Kerrville—Bill & Bonnie Hearne, and sets from up and coming John Fullbright, plus Kevin & Dustin Welch, Ray Wylie Hubbard and Asleep At The Wheel. As a Bonnie Koloc and Christine Lavin fan the final weekend promises long-awaited live sets. Sara Hickman, Butch Hancock, Marcia Ball and Bobby Bridger also feature and the final 2011 event is a Memorial Concert led by Austin's Will Taylor & Strings Attached that will climax with the latest, thirty-second, rendition of *Heal In The Wisdom*.

Kerrville...come May 26, 2011 once more it's the only place to be. **Arthur Wood**



Top to bottom:  
Bill Miller performs at the Native American Tribute Concert, Threadgill Theatre during the 1989 Kerrville Folk Festival. Photo © Arthur Wood  
Guy Clark hosts a Ballad Tree Song Sharing on Chapel Hill, Quiet Valley Ranch during the 1986 Kerrville Folk Festival. In the background to Guy's right wearing red shorts is a bearded David Wilcox, 1988 Kerrville New Folk winner. Photo © Chris Vallillo