

The First Festival

By Mary Greenman Green, Edited by Tom Teepen



There are a lot of ways to go out from Fincastle, which looks big on maps because its the seat of Botetourt County, Virginia. What clues there may have been were few and usually overlooked. Many of the first folks, going to the first Blue Grass festival, got there by trial and error, probing first down one road and then doubling back and trying another until they found the right one and came finally to a yellow Pepsi Cola sign that proclaimed: "WHYE Country Music Park."

Underbrush grew thick right up to the road, as if this were unexplored country, but just behind the brush was cleared farmland. A dusty lane led down into a grove of trees on Mr. Cantrell's Horse Farm. It was Labor Day weekend, 1965.

The crowd straggled in, if it can be called a crowd. There were maybe 150 the first night and never more than 1,000. Some were country-and-western fans

making do with Bill Monroe. Some were curiosity seekers or just had nothing else to do. Many were uncertain folk music buffs, giving Blue Grass a try. Some were veteran festival-goers, already ground-hardened from the Newport, Warrenton and Philadelphia folk festivals, a few of them building, though they couldn't know it, to Woodstock — the new tramps on a developing summer circuit.

And many were already convinced Grass fans. A lot more are convinced now.

Eight years and who knows how many groves, parks and jamborees later, it is the festivals that are counted in the hundreds, not the crowds. The old hands, as they make their plans for this summer, scan down lists of festivals, trying to decide which will be most convenient or which most rewarding or novel. And they complain to themselves — or maybe

just pretend to complain, by way of renewing a charter membership — that "the festivals aren't the same anymore."

But the festivals are the same, basically. There are more of them. They draw larger crowds. They pay the musicians some better and cost the fans more. It was \$6 for all three days of the first festival. You pay as much or more as a down payment now — inflation and the know-a-good-thing-when-you-see-it principle at work.

It remains a tribute, however, to the completeness of promoter Carlton Haney's vision, and risk, that Fincastle, the first festival, included all the elements that have since become standard and expected.

There was a banjo contest, though without either cash prize or even a plaque. Bill Emerson, Ralph Stanley and Lamar Grier were the judges, sitting

with their backs to the pickers so that they wouldn't see who they were judging. Winnie Winston drew a standing ovation for "When You and I Were Young Maggie" but lost out in that round to a 75-year-old frailer. Larry McNeely played a Brickman-like "Shuckin' the Corn" and a Renoish "Jackknifin'" fast and smoothly but came in third. Not everyone was sure his ideas were fully Blue Grass. Cullen Galyean took first place.

An effort was made for a band contest, too, but it didn't come off. Instead, any band that wanted to could get up and perform, some pretty good and some, well, say that they meant well. One man who was there remembers a group calling itself the Piedmont Belt Bucklers — a band that consisted, he says, of "a mandolin player who knew plenty of notes but couldn't play them cleanly, a banjo player with the same problem and a rhythm guitarist with no sense of rhythm." The fan concludes, maybe a little unkindly, that he assumes the Belt Bucklers have since turned to rock and roll.

And the featured performers set the pattern that still continues in many festivals, too: Bill Monroe. Of course Bill Monroe. Jimmy Martin. The Stanley Brothers. Don Reno, Red Smiley, Mac Wiseman, Clyde Moody, Benny Martin, Larry Richardson. And as the few radio spots and posters put it, "special guest, Doc Watson."

Yet for all its by-now-familiar components, Fincastle retains a special feeling that is still fresh in the recollections of the people who were there. It was, at its moment, unique, unexpected and daring. In that regard, the old hands are right. Festivals aren't the same anymore. You can go back, but you can never start over.

As some others did, Fred Bartenstein, now "Muleskinner News" editor, got word of the coming festival from a radio announcement.

"For about five years, I had tuned between static to WSM and WWVA," he remembers. "I had covered my hands with dust flipping through thousands of albums looking for the rare words 'Blue Grass' and I had sat in some of the most sordid bars on the east coast, trying to look 18 if not 21. The reaction in my mind to that one radio spot could be compared to nuclear fission. A Blue Grass what?"

Bartenstein carries the story on: "Came the Friday before Labor Day and every Blue Grass picker in Lexington, Virginia, (three of us) were packed into Freddy Goodhart's '53 Chrysler and

headed down Route 11. We paid for our cardboard three-day tickets and parked near about six other cars. Strolling down to the stage, the first thing I saw was Dave Freeman's County Records stand, heaven in itself. The second was Fred Pike and Don Reno sitting on a picnic table playing guitars. From there on in it was the closest thing to heaven a 15-year-old Blue Grass nut ever found."

Heaven it may have been in many ways, but like the festivals since, it was earthbound as well. Rick Riman remembers, "The heat, dust, lack of sanitation facilities, lack of food, lack of water, those perennial festival

refreshment stand offered pancakes, bacon and coffee early in the mornings. There was free fire wood for campers. One group claimed squatters' rights in an old, motorless truck out in the meadow, where they could doze in the shadow of a hill and listen to the droning of the wasps that had been displaced from the truck and, from farther away, the droning of the banjos on the stage.

A girl named Esther, who had come all the way from Buffalo to surprise her boyfriend Eddie, wandered the grounds looking for him. Eddie never showed up.

Timmy Martin, who was about 11 then, was complimented on the singing he had



drawbacks were there, but I expected them. I slept in my car, went unwashed the whole weekend, got a beautiful sunburn and lost six pounds, subsisting on skimmed milk and No-Doz (Gatorade hadn't been invented yet). These were part of the dues we paid to hear what was then an obscure music. But the problems helped build a camaraderie among the audience. We all put up with it cheerfully."

The park was set in the Virginia foothills, on the way up to the mountains, just high enough to chill the evenings and force the musicians, as the picking glittered toward midnight, to give up any attempts at virtuosity. Doc Watson, last act on the first night, couldn't warm his fingers up to their usual dexterity. But the days were hot and there were just enough trees near the stage and parking lot to provide shade from the sun. The

been doing on stage with his father Jimmy, but Timmy just grunted and kept on jumping from one bench seat to another.

Herschel Freeman, now a successful country songwriter, remembers "scads of collegiate citybillies, purposefully clad in Levis, flannels and boots, vainly seeking to out-pick and out-talk their peers, busily selecting the ideal spot to tape the show. They formed a cliquish, energetic community, curious in their intensity and single-mindedness."

It is the music, of course, that still comes through strongest in memory.

"The first program," Bartenstein recalls, "was a series of workshops conducted by Ralph Rinzler, replete in his chinos and white bucks. Ralph Stanley and Don Reno demonstrated banjo, and I remember one long session with Bill Monroe, in which he dusted off



mandolin tunes from all phases of his career. Pete Rowan, his new guitarist then, had a puzzled expression throughout. I remember Bill's grin as Pete fumbled through the chords to numbers like 'Blue Grass Stomp' and 'Blue Grass Ramble.' There were a lot of questions and I remember Dave Grisman being around to field them."

Not all the music was on stage. Like other features of Fincastle, the parking-lot pickin' has become a standard and occasionally outstanding element of Blue Grass festivals.

Riman, remembering the first festival, says, "An unexpected note was the high caliber of musicianship in the parking lot. I had heard plenty of moderately good picking at Newport and other places, but Fincastle was a cultural shock.

"There was the usual New York crowd; Steve Arkin and Winnie Winston, banjo; Jody Stecher, mandolin and guitar; plus the Down City Ramblers from Syracuse — Toad Trischka, banjo (then only 15), Harry Gilmore, mandolin, and Joel Diamond, guitar.

"Frank Wing and Larry Hall were trading weird banjo riffs in a gully. Larry Marschall, banjo, and Peter Ranov, guitar, picked some lovely runs in harmony, leaning against my car. Gene Meade picked some sweet guitar backup for a very short banjo picker whose name I never got.

"Bob Hoban contributed 'We'll Have a Hot Hot Time in Lakehurst, New Jersey, When the Hindenberg Lands Today.' Joe Fineman carried a typewriter, had a homemade Blue Grass song book in his

hip pocket and sang tenor whenever he could find somebody to sing lead. Butch Robbins stripped away the frills and showed how straight, hard banjo should be played."

Bartenstein has another slant on the off-stage picking, on its possible perils: "I remember playing 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown' with Freddy Goodhart for a tremendous crewcut drunk who held a .38 and said if we didn't play it right he'd shoot us. We must have played it right. That was my introduction to parking lot picking."

But it was for the music on stage that the festival existed. The rest was bonus.

"When Monroe came on stage, we had the crux of the festival," Riman recalls. "I began to realize there was another side of Blue Grass different from Flatt and Scruggs and the Country Gentlemen. The adulation that Monroe's concerts received, the drive that he, Pete Rowan, Lamar Grier and, yes, even Gene Lowinger displayed, the intoxication of seeing Monroe with Reno, Benny Martin and Mac Wiseman, together for the first time since 1949, hearing Jimmy Martin and Bill Monroe sing 'Memories of Mother and Dad,' even the performances of the lesser known Clyde Moody, all really opened my head. It was more than a festival. It was, for me at least, the beginning of an education in Monroe and his music."

Herschel Freeman puts it this way: "Looming above them all, larger than life, was the legend himself, Bill Monroe, satisfaction gleaming through his mute features at the return of all his prodigal sons. It was his festival and as he shed

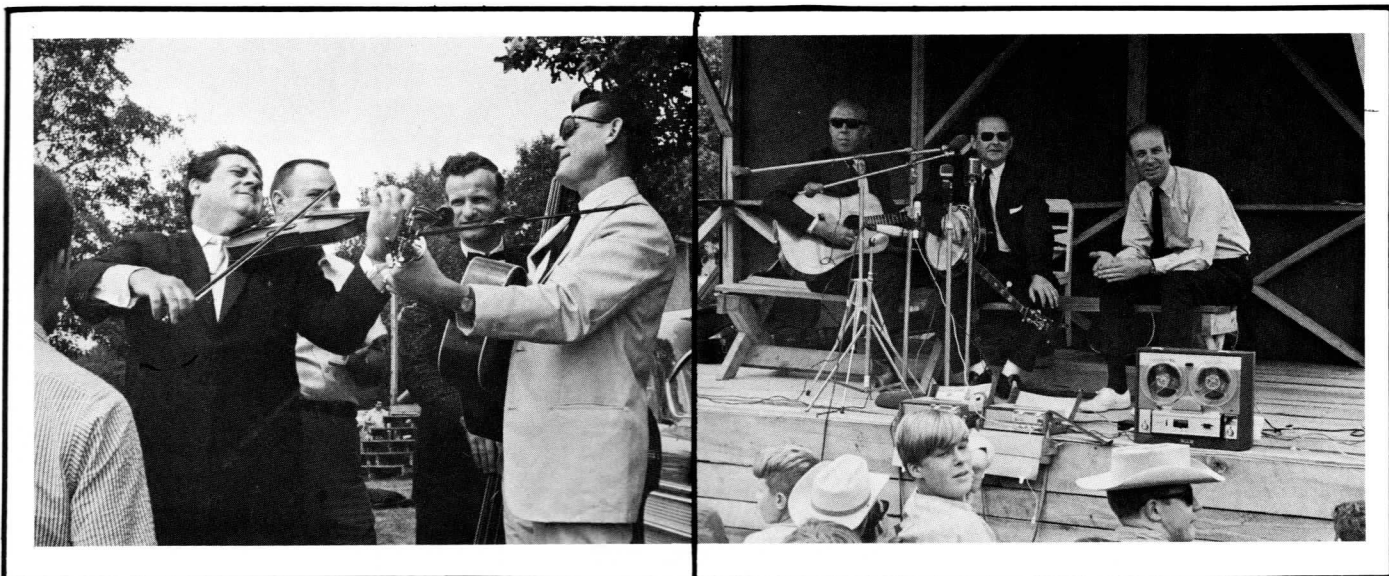
each set of noted sidemen in a glorious re-creation of his storied career, a feeling of awe and reverence rose in everyone. It was a scene of poignancy and power I shall never forget."

"Sunday afternoon was the highlight," in Bartenstein's recollection. "Carlton Haney, that most serious of characters with the most outrageous of speaking voices, took the stage and launched into what he admits was an impromptu performance, a fascinating parade of past versions of the Blue Grass Boys — starting with the inevitable 'I don't want to hear a pin drop, everybody just hush and listen. All I want to hear is the wind in the trees.' Then there were two or three tentative mandolin notes, a wild ovation and 'Muleskinner Blues.' "

Especially impressive, too, were the performances by the Stanley Brothers. "I recall lying on the ground," says Freeman, "perfectly placed between the two speakers, writhing in ecstasy as I listened to the perfect harmonies of the Stanley Brothers and George Shuffler, hanging on to every insinuation of Carter Stanley's voice, thinking I must surely be in Heaven. I remember, too, Bill Emerson, whose banjo picking was the loudest and brassiest of any picker in the house. And Clyde Moody, whose rendition of 'Six White Horses' was one of the genuine thrills of the entire weekend."

Bartenstein also remembers the Stanley Brothers' performance and terms it "unforgettable," in part because of Shuffler: "His dark glasses, chewing gum and beat-up sunburst Gibson were a show in themselves."

Throughout the weekend, the



musicians played in shifting combinations of personnel. The Stanleys borrowed Lowinger from Monroe. Jimmy Martin played with Emerson and Bill Tolbert, Red Smiley with David Deese, Gene Burroughs, Tater Tate and John Palmer. Larry Richardson had Red Barker, Buddy Pendleton and Ronnie Prevetie. Doc Watson, playing more banjo and harmonica than he usually does now was accompanied by a barely

adolescent Merle.

The picking ran late on the stage and later yet around the campfires. Dawn would come up to the tune of "Rawhide" picked on a distant mandolin, and when it was all over, when the musicians had packed up and had got the motors of their buses churning, when the campers had folded their tents and stored their gear and families had piled back into their cars, Ralph Rinzler was there

congratulating Carlton Haney but saying it had been just luck, a fluke, that it could never be done again.

In a way, it couldn't be. The special feeling of the first festival could never be quite re-created, but in hundreds of parks this summer, on hundreds of stages knocked together from rough-sawed boards, people will try, and some, a lucky few, will come very close.



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