

1965.....by Buck Peacock

I was a student at NC State in Raleigh, and Al [McCanless] was at UNC in Chapel Hill. Sometime during that summer, we learned through the grapevine that there was going to be a festival featuring bluegrass music on Labor Day in Roanoke, VA. I really didn't know a lot about it other than the where and when, and that there were going to be a lot of professional bluegrass bands there. It was a long way to go, but it just seemed like something we had to do. After summer school and before fall classes had started, Al McCanless and I were in Salisbury, our home town. My mother gave us a ride down to where Interstate 85 came through town. She dropped us off and we stuck out our thumbs. Not really knowing what we would find, we hitch hiked from Salisbury to Roanoke just to check it out. I still did not own a real guitar and we traveled light. I don't think Al had really started to play the fiddle at that point either, so he was traveling light, too. We took nothing but the clothes on our backs. When we got to Roanoke, we couldn't find any sign of a festival. But somehow we knew there was a connection to the local radio station, WHYE. We located their downtown studio and found a little flyer taped to the door advertising the Roanoke Bluegrass Festival. From this we learned that the festival location was not actually in Roanoke, but was in a little area north of Roanoke called Fincastle, more specifically at a place called Cantrell's Horse Farm. We spent the night at the YMCA in Roanoke, I think it was like \$2.00 for a room. We got up the next morning and hitch hiked the rest of the way to Fincastle. When we got there, it looked like very little was going on. There was a huge field with a little patch of trees away back from the road. As we got closer we realized that we were at the right place. There was a little stage and a few musicians picking here and there, but it was nothing as big as the Union Grove and Galax Conventions we had been to before. The stage show had not started yet, so it really just looked like a few campers standing around killing time. Bob Isenhour had driven up from Clemson with friends and met us there. It was not long before the action heated up on stage. We soon found out that the trip was well worth it.

Whereas Union Grove had been a total amateur experience, this weekend was total immersion into to the real world of hard core professional bluegrass. I remember being mesmerized by the musical acts that were paraded before us on a crude little homemade stage: Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys (Peter Rowan, Lamar Greer, James Monroe and Gene Lowenger); The Stanley Brothers, Ralph and Carter; Don Reno and Red Smiley; Jimmy Martin and his band; others and combinations of all of these. Aside from being exposed to incredible performances from the people who were the best at this style of music, I guess what I really gained from all of that was the richness of the possibilities available in bluegrass. You had established bands making all this great music. Then you had people playing together from different bands forming impromptu groups and it sounded just about as good. I realized that it was a kind of universal music that enabled even perfect strangers to get together and sound just like they had played together for years. Of course the nuances of a practiced band set them apart from the "pick-up" bands, but nevertheless, it was all bluegrass. The man who organized all of this was Carlton Haney. Working out of North Carolina and Virginia, Carlton had been a fairly successful bluegrass and country music promoter for several years. He was very aware of the growing interest in bluegrass among the by now established folk music crowd. Cantrell's

farm had a barn where Carlton had been promoting a series of country music shows. He had always tried to include a bluegrass band at these shows, and at one time had promoted an all day bluegrass show that featured multiple bands...but this was the first “festival” format anyone had attempted. Loosely based on the Newport Folk Festival model, it was a three day event complete with artist workshops: Don Reno, sitting on stage about fifteen feet away, talking about his banjo style. Unbelievable! As a central part of the program, Carlton focused on the career of Bill Monroe. He was a huge fan of Monroe. He had managed Monroe at one point and had even dated his daughter. He was one of the first people, if not the first (other than Bill himself), to single him out as the creator of this style of music. Part of his vision was to try and reunite the people who had played together on some of Monroe’s classic early recordings but had now scattered and formed their own bands. And at Fincastle he was able to pull it off.

The crowd at that first festival represented a wide variety of tastes. There were people who showed up because of the country music shows that Carlton had promoted there. They must have been disappointed when all they got was acoustic bluegrass. And there were people who were fans of bands on local radio and TV like The Stanley Brothers and Reno and Smiley. But the part of the crowd that included me and my friends came from this new fascination with bluegrass that had crept in as an adjunct to the folk music boom. This was the music we played. At that time there were not many young people in the folk movement playing bluegrass. But the ones who did, were all at Fincastle. Considering the significance of the people who were there, both on stage and off, if a bomb had gone off at that festival, bluegrass music as we know it would just about have disappeared from the face of the earth. Besides the performers, there were many future bluegrass pioneers in attendance. There were first generation, second generation and yet to come “Newgrass” innovators all there. But at the time it was just a heck of a good time with little attention paid to who was in the audience. These people came from all over the country though, and were really into bluegrass. It was a small but very enthusiastic and knowledgeable crowd. I remember Monroe kicking off “Rawhide” and then stopping and yelling to the crowd “What is it?”.... to which the crowd yelled back “Rawhide!!” Monroe must have loved that: a crowd that could play “Name That Bluegrass Tune” from just a couple of notes. A favorite the crowd kept calling for from the Stanleys was the relatively obscure (at that time) “The Fields Have Turned Brown”. I doubt if Bill Monroe or any of the others had ever played for a more appreciative crowd before that weekend.

Al and I were totally unprepared for any camping situation and had to just make do. It got pretty chilly at night so we arranged some picnic tables in a circle and built a fire in the center. I slept in my clothes on a borrowed air mattress. When I woke up the next morning I discovered that an ember had popped out of the fire and onto my air mattress. I was lying on the cold, hard ground. I had been so tired from the excitement of the previous day that I had slept soundly through the night. I’m sure I must have been stiff from that experience, but with a new day dawning and the prospect of more of this festival thing in store, I doubt if I hardly noticed. We hit the ground running.

At this festival Carlton initiated his “Bluegrass Story” (which he pronounced Stowrey). This later became a fixture at all of his festivals. That was always the agenda for the

Sunday show. Placing the beginning of bluegrass as when Monroe's recorded "Mule Skinner Blues", he asked for a moment of complete silence from the crowd, after which Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys kicked off that song. It was a very dramatic moment. He was transporting the crowd to the "birth" of bluegrass, as he understood it. The only major band absent was Flatt and Scruggs, both of whom had played with Monroe in his early bands and were generally considered essential components of the original bluegrass sound. They were involved in a running feud with Monroe that dated all the way back to 1948 when they split off and formed their own band, The Foggy Mountain Boys.

In a way the atmosphere at that first festival was similar to the fiddler's conventions we had attended, but the performers were all on a much higher level. After all, these were the people who had written the songs and originated the music we were trying to emulate. It was like studying at the feet of the Masters, giving it a feel that encompassed both reverence and respect. But regardless of that, there was a great feeling of personal connection between the performers and the audience. It was like we were all in it together. Today's festivals tend to put the artists more on a pedestal. While much of that today is due to security concerns, there is still an unspoken gap between artist and audience that was not quite that developed back then. It is mind boggling to realize that all the bluegrass festivals that have come and gone since then have sprung from the seed that was planted on that weekend by Carlton Haney and his singular vision. It has led to a phenomenon that has propelled a style of music to heights that would otherwise been impossible. His bluegrass festival model is now repeated hundreds of times a year all over the country, making it possible for innumerable musicians to advance the art, and innumerable enthusiasts to enjoy what they are doing. It is hard to imagine what bluegrass would be like without Carlton Haney.

After it was all over, Isenhour had a packed car, so McCanless and I really didn't have a ride out of there. We had to get back, as classes were starting up right after Labor Day. Somebody gave us a ride to the Roanoke bus station, where we caught the Greyhound to Greensboro. The bus was packed, too, so we rode the entire trip sitting on the floor in the aisle. When we got to Greensboro, McCanless, being the devout Catholic that he was, had to find a church so that he could attend Sunday Mass. I hung around the bus station waiting while he was off on his mission. I believe we hitch hiked back to school from there, McCanless peeling off for Chapel Hill, and me heading for Raleigh, both having had our lives changed forever.