

The First Festival

By Phil Zimmerman

It was a long straight shot down I-81 to the Route 220/Fincastle exit. Fellow musician and college buddy Peter Shenkin and I had no idea what to expect. All we had to go on was our love of bluegrass music and a vague set of directions. We took the Fincastle exit and began looking for Carlton Haney's first "Roanoke Blue Grass Festival." We found the turn-off and followed the dusty tire tracks across a pasture toward the line of trees in the distance. Even before we reached the makeshift parking lot, we heard the thump of a stand-up bass drifting across the field on the late summer breeze. Moments later we were navigating among small groups of musicians picking away.

Back at school there were barely enough players to scrape together one band, but there we were, surrounded by bluegrass! Most of my memories from that first ever Blue Grass festival at Cantrell's Horse Farm in Fincastle have faded into general impressions, but a few memories remain sharp and clear. I had been listening to Bill Monroe recordings for a few years by then, but had never seen him perform. I was impressed by his regal stature, tall and straight, supremely confident, impeccably dressed, with his white Stetson to finish "the look." When he spoke, his voice was as musical as when he sang, rhythmic, lyrical, and right to the point. It made an striking contrast to Carlton's slow North Carolina drawl, especially during Carlton's Sunday afternoon production of "The Blue Grass Story."

Jimmy Martin presented another type of interaction with Carlton. Jimmy was full of energy and attitude! I thought his wisecracking with Carlton bordered on disrespect, but I've since learned that that's just Jimmy's way. "Carlton told me to be serious," he said. "Well if I'm serious, he's Roebuck!" he quipped.

The Stanley Brothers looked very cool. They wore dark suits and ties, dark sunglasses, and loafers with white socks. Carter's singing was conversational in its intimacy, while Ralph's was urgent and lonesome like the wind in the trees. The legendary George Shuffler was with them on his big Gibson Southern Jumbo guitar. George kept blinking his eyes, saying, "The sun, it affects my eyes..."

During the Stanleys' Saturday night show, hundreds of moths were swarming around the bare light bulbs and small floodlights that lit the stage. At one point Carter opened his mouth to sing and inhaled one of the moths! He gagged and coughed it out, exclaiming, "Them chocolate bugs is all right, but them vanillers, I cain't hardly stand them!"

Benny Martin was an absolutely commanding presence, physically and musically. He had a dashing swagger, and was all over every tune he played. He remarked that, "Once you can play bluegrass fiddle, you can play any kind of music - jazz, classical, anything." Bill Monroe, on stage with him at the time, agreed proudly.

The highpoint of the weekend was the Sunday afternoon “Blue Grass Story” - a pageant featuring Bill Monroe and as many of his former sidemen as could be assembled from the bands and individual musicians in attendance, in more or less historical order. To kick it off, Carlton asked for complete silence from the audience. “I don’t want to hear a sound,” he said, “just the wind in the trees.” Then Bill Monroe played his famous mandolin introduction to Mule Skinner Blues, and they were off!

Bill was on stage for the whole show, with only a few minutes rest while the Stanley Brothers did two songs with just their own band. Otherwise, it was a non-stop parade of former Blue Grass Boys taking their place at the mic with Bill. Ralph Rinzler was orchestrating things behind the scene, while Carlton emceed with reverential enthusiasm.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Carlton introduced Bill’s then current band, Peter Rowan, Lamar Grier, Gene Lowinger, and Bill’s son James Monroe. I was seated at the edge of the stage taping the show for Ralph, and could hear all the off-mic conversation. Finally Carlton introduced James, saying, “Here’s a young man who in the years to come is really going to have to bear down.” I heard Bill say, to no one in particular, “He’s going to have to bear down right now!”

“The Blue Grass Story” was the festival finale. After the reprise of Mule Skinner, and an encore of John Henry, an emotional and triumphant Carlton Haney thanked everyone for coming, and for being such a good crowd. “There wasn’t no fights, no trouble, or nothin’,” he added. All the way home, the sounds of the week-end were ringing in my ears. I even thought I heard banjo picking in the static on the radio.

So, how did a college kid from up North even find his way to Cantrell’s Horse Farm? Actually, I wasn’t always from “up North.” Born and raised in the Midwest, I listened to the WSM Farm Show when I lived in Omaha. Later, living in a Chicago suburb, I listened to hillbilly radio station WLS and watched cowboy singer Bob Atcher’s television shows.

In high school, my classmate Bruce Kaplan, the founder of Flying Fish Records, loaned me his copy of *Alan Lomax presents Folk Songs from the Blue Grass by Earl Taylor and his Stoney Mountain Boys* and I was reconnected with the music I had heard back in Omaha.

Soon after I entered the University of Rochester, I inherited the folk music radio show from a graduating senior. That led to a position on the student Arts Committee responsible for producing cultural events on campus. In that role, I was able to bring The Lilly Brothers, Doc Watson, and Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, among others, to the U of R. Ralph Rinzler was Doc’s manager at that time, and we became friends. Ralph kept me informed of his activities with Doc, and eventually with Bill Monroe.

In the spring of 1965, Ralph told me about a Labor Day weekend bluegrass festival that he was helping to organize near Roanoke. He asked if I’d be interested in helping out with the audio taping of the stage shows while he took care of staging. Well, boy howdy, yes!!!

The rest is history!