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### Floydfest

*Floyd, VA 8/13-15/2004*

**Brian Gearing**

Wednesday, September 15, 2004

The approach into the Floyd World Music Festival on the Blue Ridge Parkway is one of the most beautiful on the east coast. The Parkway is nationally recognized as one of the most serene drives in the country. Boasting spectacular views of the surrounding valleys and almost completely unspoiled by gas stations or motor-miles, it is one of the few roads anywhere where one can drive for miles without seeing any sign of human intervention aside from the occasional rustic home. Even on the evening of the first day of the festival, the incoming traffic was thin at best, and the stereotypical, sticker-plastered Winnebagos and Westfalias were nowhere to be seen.



Rather than the faceless car-and-bag-checkpoints of Bonnaroo and the like, the entrance to the Floydfest grounds is done up like the visual incarnation of an eager hug from a long-lost friend. An arch reading "Welcome to Floydfest" opens its arms to visitors who walk down a mulched path adorned with flowers both real and sculpted as the warm sounds of acoustic music from five separate stages blend together into a noise one can almost smell. The warmth of the welcome served to allay some of the unseasonably cold air, but as more campers rolled in, so did more rain.

With more stages and perhaps a little less money to throw around than the previous two years, this youngest incarnation featured a lot of artists doing double duty. Floyd's newly adopted sons from last year's festival, the African Showboyz, kicked things off on the rustically beautiful, newly constructed, timber-framed Dreaming Creek stage with guests Jake Dempsey of The Non-Profits on bass, festival organizer Kris Hodges on drums, and Sol Creech and Kevin Hodges on guitar. Both Dempsey's Non-Profits and the Showboyz would reappear several times throughout the weekend, as would national acts Cyro Baptista, Railroad Earth, and Donna the Buffalo, among others.

As the local Boy Scout troop's bus continued to chauffeur in newly-arrived attendees from the parking area, Greensboro, NC's None the Wiser warmed up the freshly painted and aptly-named Hill Holler stage at the bottom of an amphitheater hill dotted with blankets and camping chairs. Before the end of the first evening, already energized with the African Showboyz' infectious Ghanaian rhythms, the crowd would be blessed with sounds from places as far-ranging as New Orleans, Jamaica and Northern California.

San Francisco's New Monsoon added to the evening's eclecticism with their own Eastern-tinged sound, giving the Hill Holler stage and amphitheater a healthy nighttime trampling by the large crowd gathered to witness the band's blend of bluegrass, jazz, rock and near-Eastern sounds. Lead guitarist Jeff Miller's Allmans-esque explorations piloted the band through peaks and valleys as the three-piece percussion section held down the beat. Some of the band's more contrived feel-good lyrics could be forgiven as the physical



surroundings and sonic flourishes made many of their new age sentiments seem almost possible. The band wove catchy melodies and fervent explosions of sound into progressive rock and bluegrass before leaving the stage to Railroad Earth as Acoustic Syndicate continued through their own set on the Dreaming Creek stage.

Somewhere in the middle of New Monsoon's set, the ubiquitous Larry Keel appeared on the intimate Workshop Porch with a puff of smoke and a flurry of flat-picking, as the three-time Telluride champion and de

facto Floydfest fairy godfather ran through the first of his five sets over the weekend. Also working overtime were perennial favorites Donna the Buffalo, who closed the evening down relatively early in Floydfest's newest addition, the Dance Tent.

On Saturday morning, early risers woke to more cold rain as well as rumors that Charley was headed straight for the Appalachians of North Carolina and Virginia. While many pondered packing up and heading for home, others explored the grounds and various yoga and meditation activities as clouds drifted in and out, indecisive like many of the festival goers themselves. As the morning progressed, the sounds of drum circles and bluegrass jams began to shake the sleepy heads from their slumbers and fend off the coming storm.

Cyro Baptista's Brazilian Parade officially started the day from the Dreaming Creek stage, pulling a few breakfasting onlookers through the quickening fog. Blacksburg, VA's organic hip-hop collective, TruSound, attracted a healthy crowd of booty shakers through the clouds to the Hill Holler stage, while on the main stage, next generation zydeco accordion master Keith Frank did some of his own booty shakin', as well as a hearty dose of swingin', as he and his band ran through some of his own numbers as well as a few spirited covers. Frank's ten year-old goddaughter, who lent her inspiring dance stylings to the entire set, sang on Percy Mayfield's "Hit the Road Jack," while James Brown's "Sex Machine" proved once and for all that yes, it is possible to funk on an accordion. Closing the set with "Somethin' Just Ain't Right," Frank and his infectious feel-good shuffle stole the festival up to this point, leaving the crowd still boogying long after his departure.

Donna the Buffalo's country-rock, middle-Americana was the next to grace the Dreaming Creek stage, and on approaching the massive structure, it was immediately obvious who had the largest fan contingent at Floydfest. The band found a home away from home here last year, and a return to familiar stomping grounds and the promise of three sets brought the herd together from far and wide. Often singing along with a single voice, much of the crowd joined the band on favorites like "Way Back When," the big rock crescendo of "Blue Skies," and the bittersweet sadness of "It's the Call." Donna's cover of John Anderson's "Seminole Wind" provided the most rock and roll moment of the day. As the band closed the curtain with the high-energy country jam, "Every Day," the fog rolled in once again to close out the few glimpses of sunlight that had begun to filter through the afternoon haze.

Those under the enormous trees in the Beer Garden were all but oblivious to Mother Nature's fickleness as they enjoyed the old-time sounds of nearby Roanoke's Poverty Creek, whose stellar harmonies rang true over their all-star bluegrass line-up of guitar, mandolin, dobro, banjo and bass. As spectators enjoyed local Virginia wines and brews, the quintet called upon the high lonesome sound on numbers like "Remington Ride," "Big Mine" and "Muddy Waters."

Meanwhile, Hill Holler filled up as Baltimore's The Bridge warmed the crowd's leg bones with their blend of spaz-out funk, electric newgrass and solid songcraft. Mandolinist Kenny Limer's beat-boxing was impressive, but the real fun started when the band joined in and Cris Jacob's soft, fluid guitar leads and soulful vocals led them through the spaces between their various genres. "Pick a Boogie" added a bit more funk to the jammy stew, while the follow-up, "Feels Like Coming Home," augmented the groove with a spicy, Caribbean beat as The Bridge slowly built a subtle, easy jam to a soaring end before diving headfirst back into the melody.

The fog began to lift and the blue skies hiding just beyond sight finally decided to show themselves just a few hours before evening set in, as many in the crowd began heading

back to their campsites for some much needed rest and a bite to eat. Next door to Hill Holler, with the sun outside slowly creeping toward the horizon, those lucky enough to catch New Monsoon guitarist Jeff Miller duke it out with fiddle man Tim Carbone during Railroad Earth's set witnessed the joy of music in the flesh. The smiles on the musicians' faces quickly spread through the band and into the crowd as the energy under the tent threatened to rip the huge canvas out of the ground.



The setting sun brought warm breezes from Jamaica via the Dreaming Creek stage as Eek-A-Mouse and Culture blessed Floydfest with their signature reggae sounds. And while Dar Williams' act at Hill Holler was often more like a bad stand-up set than a musical performance, the gathered crowd didn't seem to mind the extra chatter.

As Culture handed the stage over to Sam Bush, whose affable bad jokes were well mixed with some masterful picking in a set that included older material as well as a few numbers from his newest, *King Of the World*, two of the hottest performances of the weekend went virtually unnoticed. If anyone had been there to see it, local upstarts DJ Williams (Richmond) and The Non-Profits (Roanoke), may well have stolen the entire weekend. The small stage at the Workshop Porch grew bigger with every note as the young Williams' dexterous and inventive jazz guitar was brilliantly supported by his Projekt, consisting of fellow Richmonders drummer Joel Denunzio and bassist Todd Herrington of Modern Groove Syndicate, saxophonist Gordon Jones, and keyboardist Brian Monte.

At the same time in the Beer Garden, The Non-Profits, consisting of bassist Jake Dempsey, drummer Adam Clark, and brothers Cyrus and James Pace on guitar and keys, delved deep into the darker corners of rhythm and melody, giving those in attendance a touch of shadow and space that was otherwise conspicuously absent at this acoustic mountain gathering. Shifting from break beats and funk to drum 'n' bass and house grooves, the quartet barreled through space like a cosmonaut on crank, totally disregarding the flashing lights and sirens of the rhythm police before finally slamming into the burning sun of a heavy metal car crash, only to emerge on the other side in a steady low-end mountain drive beneath a clear sky full of stars.

One might never expect that the organic poly-rhythms of the African Showboyz would fit in this cosmic cacophony, but aside from a couple of stumbles over a reggae beat, their guest appearance provided yet another layer in the Non-Profits' multi-dimensional madness. Guest appearances abounded on many of the late night stages, where both Keith Frank and New Monsoon welcomed friends to their overtime shifts.

The early morning bluegrass sounds of Blue Merle and Poplar Hollow wafted into the campground as some attendees began to break down in preparation for the trip home. Those who stuck around were treated to a spirited set from Larry Keel, who was joined by friends on mandolin and fiddle as well as wife Jenny on bass. Focusing mostly on originals like "Buffalo Creek" and the tongue-in-cheek "Connie Chung," Keel also treated the crowd to one from personal favorite Bob Marley, this time offering up "Keep On Movin'."



Stubborn clouds began drifting in again as Acoustinova, made up of members of Blue Mule and the Non-Profits, added a touch of classy acoustic jazz on The Workshop Porch. Bringing to mind newgrass masters like John Cowan, Bela Fleck and Tony Rice, the quartet traded the spotlight on interpretations of Django Reinhardt, Duke Ellington and Van Morrison, wrapping up as Tempest took the stage yet again just a stones throw away at Hill Holler.

The few souls lucky enough to tough out the entire weekend were treated to afternoon sets by progressive pickers Mountain Heart, Celtic-rockers Enter the Haggis, and the crowning jewel of the weekend, a closing set by the Del McCoury Band, not to mention encore performances by DJ Williams and Vulgar Bulgars

on the smaller stages.

While all the out-of-towners must eventually leave, those who come to Floydfest find it hard not to return eventually. Some larger festivals boast a similar peace, love and music philosophy, but Floyd actually lives it, not just for one weekend, but throughout the entire year. Long renowned for its artist communities and unique roots music drawing power, Floyd often seems like a place from another time, a vaguely recollected dream from which most of the world woke up decades ago. Though the festival focuses mostly on acoustic sounds and neo-hippie sentiments, it holds a sway that even the hardest heads and hearts can't resist. Once experienced, the overwhelming sense of fellowship and serenity haunts the soul through the falling leaves of autumn and the suffocating snow of winter until finally, when spring rises again, there is an irresistible longing deep in the chest for open air and open hearts that cannot be quenched until August comes around, and the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia sing once again.

For live recordings of Floydfest, please visit [DigitalSoundboard.net](http://DigitalSoundboard.net)

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