A Few Old Memories? and Lots Of New Challenges

By Randy Pitts

Exclusive to IBMA

Attending the annual International Bluegrass Music Association World Of Bluegrass convention, trade show, and Fan Fest has always been an excellent method of determining the state of bluegrass at a given historical time.

This was particularly true of this year?s just-concluded events, the last World of Bluegrass to be held in Nashville, at least for a while. As an attendee of more than 20 years in various capacities (fan, interested observer, job seeker, talent buyer, booking agent, and supportive partner of a showcasing band member), I was struck repeatedly this year by several things: at just how integral a part of the warp and woof of the music this event has become; at how dependent we in the business have become on the organization; and -- especially now -- how IBMA faces the challenges of the future and the World of Bluegrass move to Raleigh in 2013.

In less than 25 years, World Of Bluegrass has become THE essential event for anyone who derives a livelihood in bluegrass music, be they musician, agent, manager, event, festival, or concert promoter, luthier, sound equipment manufacturer or salesman, radio or television show producer, book or blog author, talent buyer, or just someone looking for good bluegrass music. By attending this year?s trade show, one was able to compare tuners, strings, guitar straps, tone rings, promo packages, and myriad other examples of the products available to inhabitants of today?s bluegrass world. By attending the various panels offered throughout the week, one is able to connect and interact with fellow citizens of the bluegrass world and exchange thoughts, ideas, arguments, and even licks. For instance, I attended a panel entitled ?Creative Music Arrangement.? Moderated by Nashville heavyweight Harry Stinson, and including panelists Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas, and Bill Evans, this was not an atypical panel! Similar star-studded sessions filled the week?s activities.

Often characterized as part business conference, part trade show, part bluegrass festival, and part family reunion, the annual ?IBMA?* is all of that, but it is so much more. Since bluegrass is a music whose appeal depends in great part on its rich historical significance, much of the thrill of attending the World Of Bluegrass has always been the opportunity to re-establish vital connection with one?s heroes.

From the inductions of new Hall Of Fame members Doyle Lawson and Ralph Rinzler? to recognition of Distinguished Achievement honorees Byron Berline, Kitsy Kuykendall, Pee Wee Lambert, Orin Friesen, and Joe & Lil Cornett? from Fan Fest performances of icons Jesse McReynolds, J. D. Crowe, and Larry Sparks? to poignant tribute events celebrating the music and lives of recently-departed icons Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, Hazel Dickens, Doug Dillard, and the Lilly Brothers? this year continued the tradition of connection in exemplary fashion. Along with Laurie Lewis, Hall Of Fame member Del McCoury hosted Thursday night?s awards show held at the historic Ryman Auditorium. (Typically, Del charmed the audience

with the quote of the week, by my reckoning. Regarding his tussle with the teleprompter, he quipped, ?Well, I found my glasses, but I lost my composure.?) The very presence of Curly Seckler, George Shuffler, Roland White, Bill Keith, Eddie Adcock and other icons in the Convention Center halls further reminded us of the important contributions of the pioneering heroes of bluegrass ? contributions not just to its past but to its future, as current stars performed or testified in storytelling sessions how encounters with these icons have enriched their lives, careers, and music.

Of equal importance to the future of the music and the organization, it seems to me, is the growing number of young people taking up the tradition, a trend much in evidence this year in hallway jams, the trade show, the Fan Fest stage, and even at the Awards Show. I don?t recall *ever,* in years past, so many youngsters involved in hallway jams as this year, strong evidence that the future of the music is in good hands. Even a cursory listen to the tunes emanating from those jams indicated that the rich history of the music is being carried into the future by a capable new generation. Jams dominated by teenagers and even younger children proliferated, and their repertoire was largely derived from the classics of past masters.

This year, several important awards underscored he importance of tradition in looking to the future of the music. Junior Sisk and Ramblers Choice received awards for both Song of the Year and Album of the Year. For Sisk, a longtime favorite and richly deserving tradition-based vocalist, the unforgettable event was undoubtedly a professional breakthrough. The Gibson Brothers, whose sound harks back to the brother duets of yesteryear, won the prestigious Entertainer of the Year award. Repeat winners Russell Moore and Dale Ann Bradley, both decidedly tradition-based, were Male and Female Vocalists of the Year. Longtime favorites Blue Highway garnered the win for Vocal Group of the Year. There was a definite traditional bent, in fact, to the entire evening?s proceedings at the Awards Show, which also included an affecting tribute to Earl Scruggs (led by Steve Martin, kicked off by 10-year-old wunderkind Jonny Mizzone of the Sleepy Man Banjo Boys, and featuring seemingly every prominent bluegrass banjoist in the civilized world).

The music remains vital and continues to develop. What, then, of the business it has created and continues to support? By attending Thursday?s Town Hall Meeting, I was able to hear from board members the reasoning behind World of Bluegrass? move to Raleigh (and away from Nashville) in 2013. Economically, the move seemed to make sense to the majority of the board, as did moving from an event that has lasted seven days for years to five days in 2013. Board President Stan Zdonik relayed the consensus opinion that both changes would offer considerable savings to the organization and attendees as well. It is generally felt that event attendance in recent years has largely declined due to rising expenses in uncertain economic times, and a rapidly changing (and uncertain) music industry.

?We?ve been doing this event exactly the same for a very long time,? said Zdonik, who went on to indicate that it was time to explore alternative options in several areas. To that end, four new committees have been formed. One committee is charged with the task of examining the way showcases are presented, another with the design of the Fan Fest event, a third with investigating and defining the organization?s relevance to members, and the fourth will interface with the Raleigh organizing committee. I emerged from the meeting confident that IBMA?s leadership, including new Executive Director Nancy Cardwell, has the situation well in hand, equally cognizant of the pitfalls and opportunities such a move presents.

Every single IBMA World Of Bluegrass I?ve attended -- 21 and counting -- has afforded memories for a lifetime, and I?ve made lasting friendships every year. But I must admit that for me, the most lasting and precious memories came from Tuesday night?s tribute to Hazel Dickens.

Hazel was a friend for a long time, and I booked the last extended Hazel and Alice tour in 1997, just before I moved to Nashville. Hearing Hazel?s music performed by old friends of hers (and mine) -- among them Laurie Lewis, Claire Lynch, Alison Krauss, Todd Phillips, Tom Rozum, Sally Love, Dudley Connell, and James King, as well as the wonderful Kathy Mattea and the phenomenal young, all-woman band Della Mae -- provided memories that my wife Chris and I will always cherish. Hazel loved coming to the World Of Bluegrass, and seeing her was always a reason for looking forward to the next event. I feel privileged to have been a small part of the Hazel tribute, and I am reminded that creating memories is, among its many accomplishments, perhaps what IBMA does best.

Click here [1] to see the grand finale of the 23rd IBMA Awards beginning with a heartfelt tribute to Earl Scruggs, presented by 2011 Entertainer of the Year Steve Martin.

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