Published on *International Bluegrass Music Association* (http://ibma.org)

Festival of the Bluegrass Celebrates 40 Years

Let the Bluegrass Community Roll On!

By Nancy Cardwell

In his summary of six years of ethnographic field research td ?The Portable Community: Mobility and Modernization in Bluegrass Festival Life,? Robert Owen Gardner of the University of Colorado at Boulder examined participants? involvement in bluegrass music and festival culture in the American West. ?Participants left their community-starved home neighborhoods to cultivate what I refer to as ?portable communities,?? Gardner says.

Bluegrass music boasts virtuoso level instrumentalists and some of the finest, most soulful singers in any genre. But surprisingly, the great music isn?t what the participants in Gardner?s survey talked about the most. Their involvement with bluegrass music was ?driven by a quest for intimate community, open and equal social relations, and simple living,? Gardner notes, ?elements they found in short supply in their daily lives.?

The late Mitch Jayne of Bluegrass Hall of Famers, The Dillards, said bluegrass doesn?t make fans; it makes believers. One of the reasons people are drawn to this music?and stay involved?is the community of people that flourishes around the music. Borrowing from the Flatt & Scruggs gospel standard, ?Let the Church Roll On,? the theme song for this article might well be, ?Let the Bluegrass Community Roll On!?

Community is something Bob and Jean Cornett, producers of the Festival of the Bluegrass at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, KY June 6-9 understand thoroughly. It?s a big part of the reason the festival is celebrating its 40th anniversary this month, and also a big part of the reason the Cornett?s grandson Roy Miller Cornett and his wife, AnnaMarie have joined the

production team to carry the event into the future.

In honor of FOTB?s 40th, the entire city of Lexington is showing up to celebrate with a weeklong event called ?BOB 2013,? June 3-8. The acronym stands for ?Best of Bluegrass,? but for anyone who has been to the festival, the name conjures up Bob Cornett?s smiling face at the festival, as he wanders around the park shaking hands and sharing his latest idea for projects that utilize the power of bluegrass (or perhaps chestnut trees or gardens planted in straw bales) to connect generations, transforming what we traditionally think of as ?education,? inside and outside school classrooms.

Dating back to 1968 when J.D. Crowe & the New South reigned five nights a week onstage at Red Slipper Lounge, Lexington has been a hotbed for bluegrass for quite some time. AnnaMarie says the city is realizing, ?Hey, we are bluegrass. Bluegrass music belongs here?It?s being reclaimed.?

?In a lot of ways BOB is an experiment for us and for the city of Lexington,? Roy Miller says. ?We want to try and make it grow every year, to the point in the future that if you like bluegrass music, you?ll be saying, ?Meet me in Lexington!??

Live bluegrass music music is featured three nights a week during the summer in Lexington, and on Monday and Wednesday nights year round, Roy Miller Cornett notes--a recent development in the past five years. There are cycles of popularity for bluegrass music, Jean Cornett says, ?and I?ve been here long enough, I?ve seen a few of them. You just ride the wave when it comes along.?

One of the secrets to FOTB?s longevity as a bluegrass festival is that they maintain a consistent brand, but they?re also willing to experiment with some new bands who may be considered on the edge. The adage is true: If you do things the same way every year, you can?t expect the results to be different. ?You have to [experiment],? Jean says. ?We came up with a theory years ago that we would book two new bands every year. That meant that two bands would have to be dropped off and get on some kind of a rotation. That worked, until I kept booking the Seldom Scene,? she smiles.

?We?ve added a lot of new bands this year,? Roy Miller says, ?and we?re going to do instrument workshops?which we?ve never done before. We?ve got the Boxcars, and Dailey and Vincent, whom everyone?s been asking for. We haven?t had Blue Highway in a long time, and we?re having them this year.? Longtime attendees are excited about the Masters of Bluegrass combination, and the Cornetts are pleased to bring back the 23 String Band, who played FOTB for the first time last year and absolutely enthralled the crowd (and immediately sold out all their t-shirts and CDs after their set).

Forty years ago Bob Cornett had just left state government to work for the Council of State Governments, and Jean was in real estate. They had six sons, who would grow up to look a lot like their dad and each other. They?re immediately recognizable on the festival grounds: tall, slim, big smiles and premature white hair.

The Cornetts had recently attended another bluegrass festival, and Bob spoke to some friends at the state about having a festival at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington. ?We didn?t regard ourselves as particularly knowledgeable about bluegrass,? Bob says, ?but they said, ?Why, sure.? So we did. Jean will say that I was the one who came up with the idea of

doing it, but she is the one who ended up showing me what I was doing wrong and fixing it.?

The first line-up featured Ralph Stanley, Bill Monroe, J.D. Crowe, The McLain Family, Doc Watson and Vernon McIntyre, among others. They lost $10,000. The second year they cut their losses to $3,000, and by year three they were just past breaking even.

?There have been good years and bad years,? Jean says. Bob Cornett has always said that in their marriage and business ventures he is the ?big vision? dreamer who comes up with the ideas about where they should go, and Jean is the one who goes out in the field, catches the mule, and hitches it to the wagon so they can get there.

?I had to dig the ditches and clean out the latrines,? Jean says. ?He needed someone to clean up after him, and that?s the truth.?

?And those people are scarce,? Bob smiles.

Jean was originally from Lenoir, North Carolina and Bob grew up in Hazard, Kentucky. ?We met first in World History class at Berea College in January of 1948,? Bob recalls. ?I was sitting on the back row at the beginning of the semester with a buddy of mine, and we would whisper to each other, not paying any attention to the teacher. But I got to noticing a skinny little black-haired girl, and the more I noticed her, the less I paid attention to that buddy of mine. I reached up and tapped her on the shoulder?she had a sweater in the chair next to her?and I said, ?If you?ll move your sweater, I?ll come and sit beside you.? I was a smooth operator,? he smiles. ?And she said, ?If you want that sweater moved, you?ll move it yourself.? So that?s been the story of my life,? Bob laughs. It went on from there, and we got married in January three years later.?

FOTB has been a family venture. ?And it?s not just people with the last name of Cornett,? Roy Miller says. ?There are a huge number of folks who come to this event every year, for lack of a better word, who are family,? as he goes on to name two and three generations of attending families who faithfully support the festival every year. ?We could not do this without the love for that event by a whole lot of people. We don?t have employees. When you come into the front gate, it?s going to be my uncles and cousins and second cousins and their friends. I?ve got two kids on the schedule this year,? Roy says. ?And it could be that when you call, it?s Miller that answers the phone?a two year old,? AnnaMarie adds.

?I?m very proud of the festival, and where it seems to be headed,? Bob Cornett says. ?The city of Lexington now sees it as an asset. I think clearly when we started, it was just something that ?a few hicks? did. It was not viewed as belonging to Lexington.?

Roy Miller says the vision for the festival has not changed, but rather ?society and the community has gotten on board with what we?re doing.?

?I think that?s true,? Jean says. ?We?ve stayed the course,? Bob agrees.

?Watching Miss Jean for years?and it?s been 62 years we?ve been married?when she sets out to do something, she makes a genuine commitment to do it well,? Bob says. ?I think people really sense that festival belongs to them. And that?s not just words. They really do sense they?re coming to their own show. They?re not just buying tickets to come and sit at an event.?

The name for the festival was coined by Raymond McLain (the elder one), of the McLain Family Band, who served as an advisor for the Cornetts over the years. They also credit Lou Ukelson from Cincinnati, who sold albums in the early years and produced the 10th anniversary Festival of the Bluegrass LP album. Later Charlie and Doris Chase, who worked a different festival every weekend for years selling their albums and cassettes and CDs, served as ?scouts? for Bob and Jean, sharing ideas about how other festivals did things and news about hot, new bands.

After the first year at the Kentucky Horse Park, the festival moved to Masterson Station Park so the state could renovate the horse park. Everyone liked the new site so well, the Cornetts ended up staying there for around 15 years, moving back to the new Horse Park in order to grow the event with increased amenities for RVs and campers.

Over the years there have been a number of fond memories?primarily ?the lasting friendships,? Jean says.

Bob remembers the year when principal Faye King?s students from the bluegrass program at Stanton Elementary School were on the grounds for one of the early camps, and Alison Krauss and Ricky Skaggs had agreed to show them a tune. ?I don?t remember the name of the tune, but Ricky picked it out for them slowly, note by note, and you could see that it was driving him a little nuts,? Jean says. ?Then when they finished, he said, ?Well. Maybe now we can play it a little faster.?? And a little girl with a mandolin fixed him with a steely glare and said, ?Well, I don?t know it *yet;* I?m just six years old. What did you expect?? and the entire group of campers and teachers burst into laughter. ?Ricky had all the patience in the world with those kids that year, and it was a good festival,? Jean says.

She remembers a mentally handicapped gentleman who attended the festival for years everyone knew as ?Mr. Spoons.? Dressed in distinctive attire, ?he would come to the festival and play the spoons all day, every day, everywhere,? Jean says. ?He loved the children. He was everybody?s friend, and everybody would feed him. He would also sell roses.?

Roy Miller says his earliest memories of Festival of the Bluegrass are "a series of little things like running the store and selling t-shirts, and this giant container of ice for cans of soda. There was a stand Ben Scroggins had where you could spin a giant wheel and win prizes.? Roy also remembers the group of campers at ?Hippie Hill? who would go to Goodwill every year and buy couches and recliners, and then hoist them up in the branches of large sycamore trees, tied in place with rope.

Festival of the Bluegrass has always had a robust off-stage jamming scene, but in recent years like many other festivals, the jamming has fallen off. ?During the last three years we made a very concerted effort,? Roy Miller says. ?I would approach local and regional bands that would be coming to our festival anyway and say, ?I?ll give you a primitive camping ticket. All I ask of you is that you sit around your campsite and play for two hours on Friday and two hours on Saturday night. They would be doing that anyway, but if you do that with half a dozen different groups, you?ve created a situation where there?s always going to be someone playing, which inspires other people to pull their instruments out of the car. It?s really worked out well, and the picking has increased tenfold.?

Like many festivals with a long history, many attendees come back and camp in the same

place every year, naming campsites and reserving them a year in advance. One, ?Woo-ville,? even has their own website. ?Everyone formed their own communities and boundaries,? Roy says. ?We didn?t realize the importance of those ad hoc communities that formed out there. When we moved back from Masterson Station, we had to go back to the way they were doing it, and let people form their own communities.?

?That says it all,? Bob says. ?There are a whole lot of communities out there. There?s one distinguishing characteristic of bluegrass music as compared to other types of music, and that?s it. And that comes from bluegrass music?s origins in places like eastern Kentucky, where folks came together on front porches to entertain each other and to share?to talk and string beans, or any number of things. The music was a part of it. It was a self-forming community, and that?s what this is. That?s what will keep it alive. I?m confident there will be a Festival of the Bluegrass in 40 more years.?

When it comes to advice for new festival producers, Jean says, ?Well, I guess I really ought to say how I feel about it. We enjoyed going to other festivals, but we were disgusted with what people put up with, in the way of paying customers. We?ve made every effort to be nice to our customers. As far as I?m concerned the bands work for me. I don?t work for them, and I let them know that. They are on my staff to entertain the people who pay to come through the gate.?

Some events are purely a commercial venture. ?It?s been beyond commerce for us since the start,? Bob says. ?We did it because we wanted to.?

Roy Miller agrees. ?I?d rather have one person show up and camp all week long, rather than sell 50 one-day tickets. The person who camps outs out all weekend long through the rain and everything else; is your best ambassador. A person who comes for one day to see a band; it?s just a concert to them. The people who come out all weekend long; they?re family.?

?The campers ought to be the backbone of your festival,? Jean says. In fact, 70% of FOTB attendees camp out at the event.

You can tell it was started by a large family with a lot of kids,? AnnaMarie says, ?because it?s a family festival. It?s kid-friendly. There are bubbles, a puppet show, and an instrument petting zoo with Charlie & Mary Jo Leet on the schedule this year. We want families. We want kids. This is the preservation of a culture, and I think it?s one of the most important things about the festival.?

?I have never, in my entire life, not known Festival of the Bluegrass, including when I was in the womb,? Roy Miller Cornett says. ?It?s happened every year I?ve been alive. Then five years ago Grandma sat me down and said, ?You don?t want this. You don?t realize how much work it is.? And she was right. It?s a lot more work than you realize. But at the same time, what I told her was, on the second week of June if there was no Festival of the Bluegrass, I don?t know what I?d do with myself. I?ve got a 15 year old son who has been working at the festival store. Last year he brought a friend with him to work, and this year he has three friends who want to come and work, because they?ve been talking about it all year, about how much fun it is.?

?In December our kids will come up to us and say, ?Is it festival time yet??? AnnaMarie says.

?Some families put on a family reunion. We put on a bluegrass festival,? Roy says. There are 43 Cornetts on the schedule this year, from the immediate family?over fifty counting second cousins. ?Just see what happened because you moved that sweater,? Jean quips.

IF YOU'RE GOING TO BOB...

- **Organized by the Lexington Area Music Alliance (LAMA), BOB 2013 kicks off Monday, June 3 with the Cleverlys, The Moore Brothers Band and an interview with IBMA?s Nancy Cardwell on*WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour* at the Lyric Theater, followed by a BOB Kickoff Party at Natasha?s with Gangstagrass, the band from New York City that recorded the theme song for the FX network hit show,*Justified.***
- **On June 4 Newtown will perform at the Southland Bowling Lanes, and Alison Brown will be at Willie?s.**
- **The Flint Ride Millers and Appalatin will be featured on Red Barn Radio June 5, and the concert will be filmed for the Kentucky Educational Television (KET) series,*Kentucky Muse.***
- **Bluegrass Collective will be featured at the city?s ?Thursday Night Live? event June 6 at the 5/3 Pavilion, followed by the first night at FOTB with Lonesome River Band, Coal Town Dixie and Newtown.**
- **Dailey and Vincent will take the festival stage on Friday, June 7, along with Russell Moore & IIIrd Tyme Out and the 23 String Band.**
- **Saturday, June 8's line-up includes the Masters of Bluegrass featuring Del McCoury, J.D. Crowe and Bobby Osborne; Town Mountain; Seldom Scene (Jean?s perennial favorite); and more.**
- **Shuttles will run from bluegrass venues in Lexington out to the festival grounds Thursday ? Saturday, for campers who want to check out some of the music in town.**
- **Visit the website to learn more here[1]**

Photo above, L-R: Bob & Jean Cornett, Roy Miller & AnnaMarie Cornett (Festival of the Bluegrass 2011)

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