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

Bluegrass at Bonnaroo

By Taylor Coughlin

On a dusty farm-turned-temporary metropolis, thousands of music lovers are getting their souls fed. Some are half naked in response to fashion statements and the weather, and some are adorned with band t-shirts they found in thrift shop bins from 1972. They bob their heads to the beat of the music coming from a hip-hop set, and boogie down to the rhythms of soul-shaking band on another stage a few yards away.

And then there are two men, with a little bit of grey and white in their perfect hair, with nothing but string instruments poised in their arms, whose audience melts outside the shade of their tent, attempting to clamber in.

This is the ?That Tent? designated for bluegrass on the last day of the festival, produced and hosted by *The Bluegrass Situation*. It?s Sunday, and Bonnaroovians are going all out, soaking in every last melody before the festival ends, and Sam Bush and Del McCoury are giving their all, attracting new fans, and nailing it- as usual. By the end of the night, and with the help of the other groundbreaking artists who played on The Bluegrass Situation stage that day, the genre of bluegrass would have new fans.

Bluegrass is no stranger to the world-famous Bonnaroo Music and Arts festival held annually in Manchester, Tennessee. In its inaugural year in 2002 The Del McCoury Band, Bela Fleck & Edgar Meyer, and Old Crow Medicine Show were on the bill. What was different this year, however, was the star power behind it all: Actor and comedian Ed Helms, whose blog and brand *The Bluegrass Situation*, was asked to produce the ?That Tent? lineup for Sunday.

Spanning from progressive to traditional, the Tent held sets from: Aoife O?Donovan, the Crooked Still frontwoman, who has a new album called *Fossils*; John Fullbright, a rock/rootsy Grammy-winning force to be reckoned with; Black Prairie, a progressive string band from Oregon with a couple Decemberists members; Noam Pikelny & Friends, the likes of whom are Bryan Sutton, Jesse Cobb, Luke Bulla, and Barry Bales; and the dream duo of Del McCoury and Sam Bush. The evening ended with a Superjam with all of the above, with Critter Eldridge, Chris Stapleton, Ed Helms, and Dan Tyminski joining the ranks. This all happened the same time Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers were playing the main stage, and the tent was packed to the brim.

Throughout the day, new fans were brought to bluegrass through O?Donovan?s nerve-tickling vocals, Fullbright?s soulful blues-tinged rock, and Black Prairie?s hazy, string roots tunes. The same audience who had danced and yelled for those artists happily stayed put for the rest of the night as the sound drifted into strictly acoustic stringed instruments. It was easy to notice the new fans: They would have a look of surprise and joy on their face, as if they had just discovered something that they wouldn?t let leave them when they left Bonnaroo.

New fans of bluegrass were brought in by sounds rooted in Americana, blues, and roots rock. Or, they were brought in by two men with a little bit of grey and white in their perfect hair, with nothing but string instruments poised in their arms.

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