

Woody Guthrie Folk Festival

Okemah, Oklahoma, July 9-13

As WoodyFest entered its second decade, the 11th annual festival held in Guthrie's home town to commemorate the life and musical legacy of one of America's greatest folk musicians and troubadours was also tinged with sadness as artists and fans alike paid tribute to Bob Childers, the Godfather of Red Dirt Music, who passed away in April. Childers, who appeared at the inaugural festival in 1998 and every year there after, was often referred to as the 'Dylan of the Dirt' and his untimely death at the age of 61 means the festival has lost one of its most popular and enduring performers.

However, Childers' own legacy will continue in the capable hands of bands like the Red Dirt Rangers, who considered him a brother, mentor and kindred spirit.

Childers was honoured at a pre-festival concert in Tulsa. Among the performers paying tribute to a much-missed friend were the Burns Sisters, the Red Dirt Rangers and Jimmy LaFave. LaFave was especially close to Childers and was personally involved in organising the three CD set *RESTLESS SPIRIT: A TRIBUTE TO THE SONGS OF BOB CHILDERS*, released in 2004 to

the help and support he had offered.

WoodyFest is much more than just a music festival, with many related events such as poetry readings, discussions, a festival for children, outreach concerts in care homes, a photography exhibition, a film showing and a play reading.

When in the late 1990s the idea of WoodyFest was first mooted, the organisers approached Guthrie's son Arlo and daughter Nora to seek their blessing. They both felt that their father would want the festival to be open to all and they stipulated it should be free.

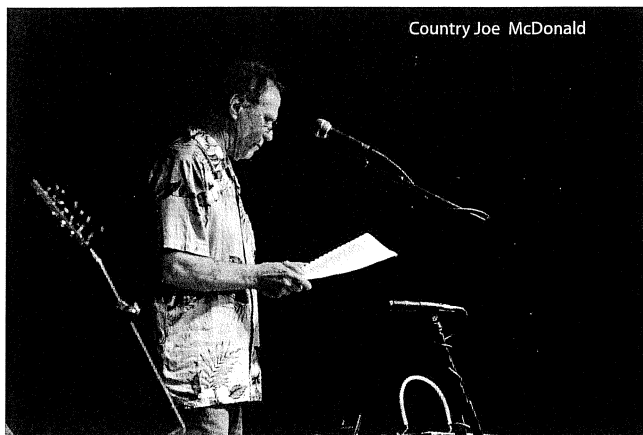
To this day, the festival remains largely free with the only ticketed event being the opening night which this year featured Country Joe McDonald who presented his one-man, two-act musical play paying homage to Guthrie.

McDonald opened with Guthrie's most well known song, *This Land is Your Land*, regarded by many as the unofficial national anthem of America. The performance ended with *So Long It's Been Good to Know You* and for the encore, McDonald treated us to a rousing version of his 'Fish' *Cheer I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag*—suitably updated to include references to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

One of the really nice things about this festival, and there were many, was the age range of the performers—the youngest at 17, Anthony da Costa and at the other end of the scale, at a mere 77 years young, David Amram who met Guthrie in 1956. The opportunity to listen to young performers like da Costa, Emily Elbert, Alexinder Gunn and local boy John Fullbright (to name a few) showed that folk music need not worry about losing its heritage—it is being more than ably preserved by these raw young talents.

Anthony da Costa has been garnering a good deal of critical acclaim. In 2007, he was the youngest ever winner of the Kerrville Folk Festival's New Folk Award and the Falcon Ridge Folk Festival's Emerging Artist competition. Although only 17-years-old, he has released a

number of CDs. His latest solo release being the 11 song self-penned *TYPICAL AMERICAN TRAGEDY*. During his set he played six songs from the CD but started off with Dan Bern's *Jerusalem* and ended with an unplugged version of Justin Rutledge's *Don't Be So Mean Jellybean*.

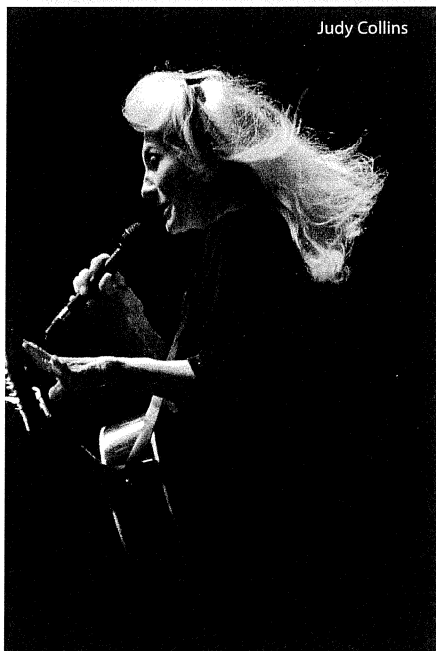


Country Joe McDonald

As a family friendly festival, two days are devoted to children's activities in City Park. They included a bouncy castle, water slide, harmonica lessons, face-painting, crafts, clowns and of course music. Music on Saturday morning was from the Red Dirt Rangers who have released a children's CD *BLUE SHOE* and Ellis Paul who has recently won a Parent's Choice Foundation Silver Award for *THE DRAGONFLY RACES*. I caught the show just as the Rangers were finishing their set and Paul was about to come on. Together they sang *The Cat Came Back*, a well known children's song written in the 1890s. Paul continued with his solo set singing six songs from his CD.

As with most festivals, there is more than one stage so you have to accept that you cannot possibly see everyone on the bill, although in Okemah, two indoor venues are used for the daytime shows and only one outdoor stage is used in the evening.

One of the outdoor sets on the Thursday evening featured a solo performance by Kevin Welch who simply blew me away with his song craft and musicianship. His writing is very visual and he performed an outstanding set of his own songs as well as a wonderful cover of John Hiatt's *Train to Birmingham*. I can see that I am going to need to spend more money catching up with his back catalogue, which if you combine his solo work and collaborations runs to some 12 CDs. It's going to be



Judy Collins

raise money to help defray the cost of Childers' medical bills. Throughout the festival, the presence of Childers was apparent in spirit. Many performers dedicated songs to him and talked about

expensive!!!!

Another of the outdoor evening sets was 'Remembering Phil Ochs' a tribute show to the protest folk singer who died in 1967. His sister Sonny Ochs originally gathered musicians for a Song Night back in 1983 at the Speakeasy in Greenwich Village, New York to keep Ochs' music alive, whilst at the same time showcasing musicians and donating proceeds to non-profit organisations with affiliations to folk music. Over the years the annual tribute show has featured many artists and the performance at this year's WoodyFest was the show's Oklahoma debut. It was also filmed by the BBC, who is making a documentary about American folk music. The line up included, Jimmy LaFave, the Red Dirt Rangers, John Gorka, John Flynn and Sean Flynn, David Amram, Sara Hickman and Anthony da Costa.

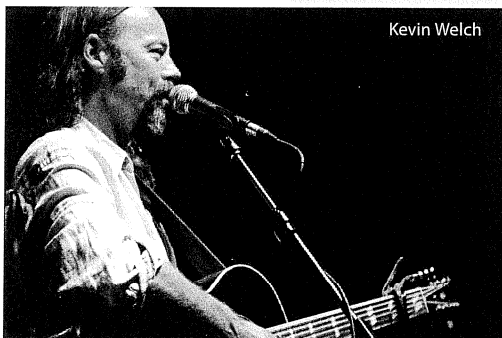
Also on the main stage earlier that same evening was John Gorka, a personal favourite whom I last saw six years ago so I was really looking forward to seeing him perform again. He has a very quiet, unassuming personality and played a wonderfully warm and engaging set including *Stranger With Your Hair*, *I'm From New Jersey* and *Writing in the Margins*.

Many festivals have a policy of not inviting the same artists in consecutive years—WoodyFest departs entirely from this in that it has a core of performers who have been in attendance every year, and this year the line up on the final evening included some of the 'regulars'—the Red Dirt Rangers, Joel Rafael, Ellis Paul and Jimmy LaFave.

They are all wonderful interpreters of Guthrie.

Rafael, considered a natural and pre-eminent interpreter of Guthrie's music, has released two critically

acclaimed CDs *WOODEYE* (2002) and *WOODYBOYE* (2005) featuring Guthrie's songs, a handful for which he composed the music. A new CD *THIRTEEN STORIES HIGH* has just been released and comprises 11 songs of original compositions and two covers—Steve Earle's *Rich Man's War* and Jack Hardy's *I Ought to Know*. The lead track on the CD, *This Is My Country*, features background vocals by David Crosby and Graham Nash. An affecting and plain-spoken



protest song in which Rafael upbraids politicians for taking the country into war. Rafael was delighted to tell me Graham Nash is singing the song on the current Crosby, Stills and Nash tour of the US.

During Ellis Paul's set the rain came in—remember this part of Oklahoma is in the notorious Tornado Alley so we all braced ourselves as we saw the sky darken and the impending storm clouds approach—Paul and his accompanists, Don Conoscenti and Radoslav Lorkovic, in true trooper style carried on almost as if nothing was happening. The grand piano on stage was covered with a blanket to protect it from the rain but Lorkovic continued to play on and the three of them completed the set, in the driving rain getting soaked through during the last two songs *Walking After Midnight/Change* melody and *Blacktop Train*. True professionals!

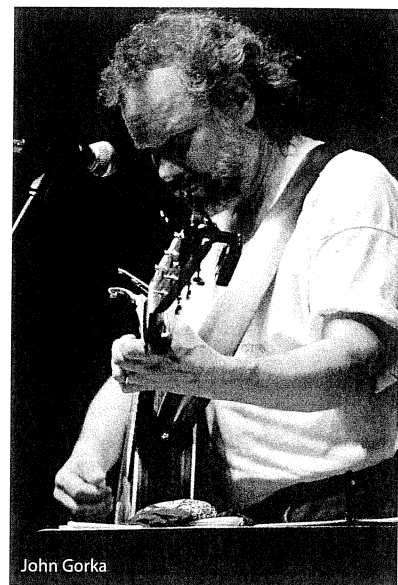
Next up was Jimmy LaFave. He and his band just 'got on with business' setting up despite the rain and the show continued with barely a hitch...these guys are just so matter of fact about any obstacles that Mother Nature might send their way! LaFave's band is hot; they play together with the minimum of fuss and always, always deliver! LaFave himself has a voice like no other, he sings with his eyes closed and although he's not one to say much between songs he manages to captivate his audience from the first note.

In many ways, LaFave is the heart of the festival, appearing every year, hosting Mary Jo's Pancake Breakfast where Guthrie's baby sister, Mary Jo Guthrie Edgmon, shares stories about big

brother, against the backdrop of musicians under the watchful eye of LaFave. This year's Pancake Breakfast which opened Saturday's proceedings was very emotional with everyone really feeling the

absence of Bob Childers. In his memory there was an empty chair on stage draped with a black T-shirt depicting a very rare white buffalo—in Native American culture the white buffalo is sacred and carries great spiritual importance.

Judy Collins, this year's headline act on the final, by now very windy night, was making her first WoodyFest appearance some 40 years after playing in a tribute to Guthrie—produced by



Harold Leventhal—at Carnegie Hall in early 1968 just three months after Guthrie's death. Best known as an interpreter of other writer's songs, she reminisced movingly about her childhood and connections to Guthrie and his family during her set which saw her sing both old and new songs. I particularly enjoyed *Norwegian Wood* and her rendition of Sandy Denny's *Who Knows Where The Time Goes*. She closed the evening with an a cappella *Amazing Grace* in her pure soprano.

During the festival there were also great performances from Butch Hancock who has a new CD coming out later this year and is back in the studio recording with Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore—the Flatlanders are planning to release a new CD in 2009; Romi Mayes who is getting airplay on BBC Radio 2 and Grammy Award winner, Jon Vezner.

I can't finish without mentioning Maverick Festival headliner Sam Baker, who was making his fourth consecutive WoodyFest appearance. Accompanied by the 'Croatian Sensation' Radoslav Lorkovic who is the busiest musician in Okemah, playing with just about everyone, Baker performed a set which included one unrecorded song inspired by the messages people write on cards when begging for money on the streets of his home town Austin, Texas. He also told some terrible jokes but I won't go there! This was my 11th Sam Baker concert and it was the most confident performance I'd seen. UK fans are in for a real treat when he takes the stage in Suffolk with a full backing band. I've bought my ticket!

WoodyFest and all that it offers is a testament to the high regard modern day musicians and fans alike have for Woody Guthrie. Long may we all continue to return to Okemah each summer to celebrate the life and work of this Dust Bowl Troubadour. *Jela Webb*