

Pickin' & Grinnin'

On what would have been Woody Guthrie's 98th birthday, his son Arlo opened up the 13th annual Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, affectionately known as WoodyFest, at the historic Crystal Theatre in his father's hometown, Okemah, Oklahoma. The first night of this five-day celebration of the 'Dust Bowl Troubadour', is traditionally held at the Crystal Theatre and is the only ticketed event—the rest of the festival is free aside from a \$10 parking fee at the Pastures of Plenty, the outdoor evening stage.

Arlo Guthrie last played the festival in 2007; he tours relentlessly, is often on the road for ten months a year and when introducing him, the Master of Ceremonies, Bill McCloud, said that before the Coalition (the voluntary body which organises and runs the festival) started planning for 2010, he received a two line e-mail from Arlo which simply said 'Coming back this year. Looking forward to it.' And so the opening night was taken care of...

Surrounded by family and friends both on and off stage, Arlo Guthrie gave an intimate performance during which he reminisced about his childhood, speaking warmly of his father and recalling how he had taught him *This Land Is Your Land* so that he would no longer be the only child in class who did not know the words! He talked about growing up in a house often filled with musicians, the likes of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee being particular influences. His selection of songs started with *Chilling Of The Evening* which dates back to his 1967 release *ALICE'S RESTAURANT* and



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Woody Guthrie Folk Festival

Okemah, Oklahoma, July 14–18

he took us through many aspects of his life and times on and off the road, sharing anecdotes as well as exchanging pleasantries with his two elderly aunts in the audience. He brought on the Burns Sisters initially for 'an old one' *St James' Infirmary* after which they continued to provide harmony vocals. Recalling his 1969 Woodstock appearance he effortlessly led into *Coming Into Los Angeles* and then generously gave the spotlight to his grandson, Krishna Guthrie, who performed his own composition, *Siren*.

Arlo now the patriarch of the Guthrie family said: 'On my dad's birthday I'm going to sing a couple of his songs' and moved into *Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)*, following with *I Hear You Sing Again* the melody to which was composed by Janis Ian. Throughout his set, he was seated on a high stool and looked like the quintessential folk singer he is, with a rack of guitars at his disposal, a harmonica around his neck and his long hair flying away from his face. He paid tribute to Steve Goodman for giving him *City Of New Orleans* and included *My Peace* (father's lyrics, his melody) prior to encoring with America's alternative national anthem *This Land Is Your Land*. The Guthrie family connection was further represented by Arlo's support; son-in-law Ramsay Midwood, played an hour long set including *Hard Travelin'* in tribute to his late grandfather-in-law.

This festival typically attracts a core of performers who have appeared at every one—Don Conoscenti, Joel Rafael, the Red Dirt Rangers, Terry Ware and Jimmy LaFave, the latter being synonymous with the annual event hosting the fundraiser for Huntington's Disease, Mary Jo's Pancake Breakfast, being an advisory member of the Coalition, inviting artists to appear, facilitating recording opportunities and of course headlining the final night, of which more later.

Festival debutants this year included Red Molly, who fulfilled a long-held a desire to appear here. Their signature three-part harmonies immediately won over the crowd and as they sang they accompanied themselves variously on guitar, banjo and Dobro. Their set included *The Mind Of The Soldier* the winning (folk song) entry in the 2008 John Lennon Songwriting Contest and *Can't Let Go* which was covered by Lucinda Williams on her Grammy award winning *CAR WHEELS ON A GRAVEL ROAD*. Written by Randy Weeks, another festival debutant who as well as playing his own set, was lead guitarist for both BettySoo and Jess Klein during their respective sets.

Jonathan Byrd a native of North Carolina, engaged the audience with his words and music; he employs a mean finger-picking guitar style, some flat picking too, and puts a modern twist upon the traditions of Appalachian music, evoking beautifully clear images of the characters and settings he writes about—the 'crazy' former girlfriends in *The Waitress* and *Amelia*, his wife's penchant for 'shooting targets' in *38 Baby* and the veteran, fallen on hard times who is a masterful pianist in *The Ballad Of Larry*. After the show, Byrd's name was the one on many people's lips and his debut here was a triumph.

Another 'first timer' who garnered excellent reviews was John Wort Hannam whose *QUEENS' HOTEL* has been nominated for a 2010 Juno Award. He opened with *With The Grain* a song recalling a conversation with his carpenter father, when he decided to give up his five-year teaching career to follow his dream to succeed as a singer-songwriter. A nine-song set amusingly interspersed with wry anecdotes including how, shortly after arriving in Okemah the previous day, he explored the town and helped an elderly lady find her way, she thanked

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him and said: 'I'm Woody's sister' to which he thought 'Yeah and I'm Elvis' brother!' only to discover later on that she really was Mary Jo Guthrie Edgmon! Securing the assistance of Bob Beach on harmonica for part of his set, Hannam who describes his style as 'blue collar roots' sang *Sweet, Sweet Rose, Pier 21* and *Anabelle* amongst others before being called back for an encore. *Lucky Strikes* was his choice. A very confident performer and engaging personality.

Probably the busiest musician at Woody Fest during the past five years has been Radoslav Lorkovic. His introduction to the festival as a member of Jimmy LaFave's band in 2005 brought him to the attention of many more prominent musicians who clamoured for his services as an accompanist either as an accordionist or on keyboards. With a classical heritage, Lorkovic was, for a number of years, Odetta's accompanist prior to her death in 2008. He has also worked with Greg Brown, Bo Ramsey and Richard Shindell as well as releasing his own critically acclaimed solo CDs the latest of which *WASTELANDS AND CASINOS* was available to coincide with this year's WoodyFest. It is not at all unusual to see Lorkovic accompany the first act of the day at 11am and then find him still in accompanist mode during the last set of the day, as midnight nears, knowing that in between he has played with any number of musicians. It doesn't end there either! After the official performances have taken place, many musicians play impromptu sets throughout the night in the car parking lot attached to the motel, where they room throughout the festival. You can be sure that Lorkovic is one of the key protagonists in what has become a much-loved tradition. It was

therefore a real treat to catch his solo set at the Brick Street Café which doubles as an indoor stage during the day. Lorkovic started with *Elysian Fields* enlisting the help of the Burns Sisters on harmony vocals and mixed his set with self-penned material including *The Tallest Tree* a tribute to the late Bob Childers and a few covers. These included *Louisiana 1927* by Randy Newman and a couple of Iowan bluesman Joe Price's songs finishing with Price's *Bye You Bye* as he left the stage, accordion in hand and continued playing and singing as he made his way through the crowd and up the stairs from the basement location. Superb entertainment!

Don Conoscenti, based in Taos, New Mexico is one of the performers who has appeared at each of the previous festivals and is a real favourite here; as well as playing his own set he plays lead guitar for others (Ellis Paul, Sam Baker). Patrick Turnmire on percussion and Patrick Neher on bass accompanied Conoscenti. His latest CD *TURN HERE* was a virtual sell-out at the festival; he held some copies back for his traditional post WoodyFest Sunday evening show at The Chouse in Norman, Oklahoma. Showcasing material from the afore-mentioned release *Mona Lisa; Black Eyed Suzi; What Else Could I Do* and *Echo* performing a newly written song and paying homage to Guthrie with *Vigilante Man*, Conoscenti was on top form. A highly accomplished musician who traded between acoustic guitar, electric guitar and banjo on this occasion. For his encore he invited up Lorkovic (accordion) and Jeannie and Marie Burns (harmony vocals) for a rousing version of Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama*. Pure class.

John Fullbright accompanied on lead guitar by Terry 'Buffalo' Ware, playing

in his home town to a full house at the Crystal Theatre is the 'most talked about folk singer in the country' and watching how he has developed since first appearing here as a 16 year old (he is still only a mere 21 years old) one can see why he is receiving endorsements from many respected musicians. A young man with an old soul he, to paraphrase an observation made by Austinite John Dee Graham, 'is not only writing beyond his years, he is writing beyond his talent'. Fullbright joked that he was probably related to at least half the audience but that is not to take anything away from the rapturous reception he received. To date he has released one CD *LIVE AT THE BLUE DOOR* but is recording a much anticipated studio album this summer. From his first song *All The Time In The World* through to his much-deserved standing ovation at the end, he held the audience in his thrall. One most definitely to watch.

It is impossible to comment on everything that occurs at WoodyFest so a few vignettes—BettySoo opening her set with Butch Hancock's *Boxcars* remarking that 'a true Texas poet' wrote it without realising that he was in the audience. Ronny Elliott's polemic railing against the previous Bush administration, the war in Iraq, the BP oil spill and more besides really was a stream of consciousness outpouring, to much applause. Ellis Paul dedicating his headlining set on Friday night to Becky Grider, a member of the Coalition who passed away so prematurely in June after a short illness. Sam Baker for being well...Sam Baker. Jess Klein writing and performing her strongest material to date from her *BOUND TO LOVE* album. Susan Herndon continuing to perform unplugged, in complete darkness after a transformer blew during her set, whilst Nancy Apple shone a torchlight upon her. David Amram at almost 80 years old, an American icon, outlasting the youngsters at the parking lot jams. Marie Burns' vocals on *The Hills Of Ithaca*. Stoney LaRue's young fan base making for the best attended Thursday night ever and of course Jimmy LaFave's headlining Saturday night set. Playing with a tight band, LaFave just wowed the crowd with his playing, his singing, his generosity in letting others shine (viz John Inmon's guitar on the cover of Dylan's *All Along The Watchtower*) and his inclusiveness when inviting all the artists on stage for the last four songs of his set. More than one person remarked 'this is why we keep coming back to WoodyFest'. **Jela Webb**

