

Woody Guthrie Folk Festival

Okemah, OK

July 10-14, 2002

For the fifth year in a row, folk music fans and artists alike have gathered in Okemah, Oklahoma, to celebrate the life and work of an American legend. The Woody Guthrie Folk Festival (dubbed "Woody Fest" by attendees) takes place annually, coinciding with Guthrie's birthday, in the small rural town where he grew up. The festival is a labor of love presented by the Woody Guthrie Coalition in an effort to advance Guthrie's musical legacy.

Woody Fest is a gathering unlike any other. With four days of music events and some 50 artists appearing, the festival presented almost too much to take in. The pace was relaxed, however, and few events overlapped one another. The festival boasts a total of five venues, including a children's stage in the city park, and most are within walking distance.

In addition to numerous nationally recognized touring musicians, the Festival featured an abundance and diversity of regional talent. Oklahoma City native Mary Reynolds brought Thursday's mainstage audience to its feet with her moving acoustic version of Elvis Presley's 1961 hit, "Can't Help Falling in Love." Even Reynolds' fellow artists sharing the stage appeared captivated by her angelic voice and passionate delivery. The brief performance, and Reynolds' humble acceptance of the standing ovation it received, remained the topic of many conversations throughout the festival weekend.

Another new discovery was the music of Travis Kidd. Making his third Woody Fest appearance, Kidd performed an exciting acoustic set of original material. His songs are rooted in folk, rock, and country, and his comfortable, easygoing stage presence made a quick and lasting connection with the audience. In addition, Kidd seems to have attained the difficult lyrical balance of being subtly intricate while delivering a straightforward message.

Initially, some of Okemah's residents were less than enthusiastic at the thought of an annual folk festival invading their little town. In an effort to improve relations, The Coalition arranged a series of outreach events that coincide with the festival each year. I was invited to accompany Don Conoscenti to one of these events. He performed a private concert at the Okemah Care Center, a nursing home located on the edge of town (a second nursing home was the beneficiary of a similarly organized Johnsmith concert).

Seated in the home's sunroom, before a darkened big-screen TV, Conoscenti sang and played for about an hour while residents sipped root beer floats and enjoyed the music. At the conclusion of the show, an elderly woman approached Conoscenti to relate her own musical experience as a young girl. The two told stories and laughed together, and for a brief period she was transported back to her youth. The exchange left those few who had witnessed it with an appreciation of the depth of Guthrie's legacy.

The spirit of Woody Guthrie, as well as his music, was in evidence at every turn, and most artists covered his material. Among the many varied renditions of classics "Deportee" and "This Land Is Your Land," few stuck out as vibrantly as Vance Gilbert's bluesy version of "Ship in the Sky."

Perhaps the most unique interpretation of Guthrie's songs was performed by Ellis Paul. At the invitation of the Guthrie family, Paul selected a lyric from the archives and set it to his original music. The result is "God's Promise," a song that Guthrie originally penned in 1955 while hospitalized in Brooklyn, New York, and suffering from Huntington's disease.

There are several must-see landmarks in Okemah. Most are located on Broadway (the town's main street). The historic Crystal Theater, where Guthrie performed, the place in the sidewalk where, in 1927, he wrote his name

in wet cement, and a bronze statue of the folk singer (commissioned by the Coalition) all draw the attention of curious visitors. Of the Guthrie-related landmarks in Okemah, perhaps the most heartbreaking is the site of his boyhood home. Located on a small side street (just a short walk from a building-sized mural honoring Guthrie), overgrown weeds, loose rock, and a crumbling foundation are all that remain of the small house where one of this country's most prolific songwriters spent his formative years. The unmarked site provides further evidence of a town still coming to terms with the legacy of its most famous citizen.

Among the most exciting musical highlights of the four-day weekend were the often impromptu collaborations. Mary Reynolds accompanied Darcie Deaville. Jeff Berkley provided percussion for Ellis Paul. Bill Miller and Don Conoscenti each invited the other to contribute. Other performances of note included sets by Tom Prasada-Rao, Ray Bonneville, the Joel Rafael Band, Slaid Cleaves, and Kevin Welch.

Clearly, the most highly anticipated set of the weekend was the finale, to be performed by Austin-based singer/songwriter Jimmy LaFave and his band. LaFave has performed at the Guthrie Fest every year since its inception and is a champion and ardent supporter of the event. Although he was set to deliver the final performance on the final night, LaFave was a fixture in Okemah from the festival's opening day. He tirelessly made himself available to everyone, meeting fans, making friends, signing autographs, and talking with reporters. He seemed never to stand still. The affable LaFave was even seen taking photos for a group of excited tourists gathered around the Woody Guthrie statue.

Having never seen LaFave perform, or heard his music, expectations from four days of build-up were running high. Vance Gilbert's hilarious impersonation of LaFave could not sufficiently prepare one for his performance any better than the attempts by his fans to describe him. When LaFave and his band finally took the stage, all expectations were shattered... much like a wrecking ball might strike a house of cards. LaFave sings with a confident nonchalance, his voice effortless and unburdened. He is a showman without being showy, a smooth and fearless performer. The songs LaFave chose to present cast most of the focus on Woody Guthrie, though he did perform "Never Is a Moment" and "This Glorious Day" from his recent album, *Texoma*.

After inviting the Guthrie family members to join him onstage, LaFave and his band launched into Woody Guthrie's best-known song, "This Land Is Your Land." One by one, LaFave called performers to come forward, steadily building until every artist remaining at the festival was on the stage singing along. Several artists took turns leading a verse as LaFave graciously relinquished the microphone to his peers. Some added their own lyrics to the song, the most powerful being those penned by Slaid Cleaves following the terrorist attacks of September 11. As Cleaves sang about "Ten thousand nightmares...", many in the audience wept openly. And, with emotions at a fever pitch, the song and the festival ended in triumphant fashion. As Ellis Paul had noted during his set two days earlier, that song "is our *real* National Anthem." - *Annette C. Eshleman (Lancaster, PA)*