

Kerrville Folk Festival 2001
A Rookie's Story

Frank Goodman (Puremusic 7/2001)

In the early nineties, a few of my Nashville friends (notably Kate Wallace) started to make what later became an annual pilgrimage to Quiet Valley Ranch, an hour West of San Antonio, TX for a gypsy summit and acoustic soiree called the Kerrville Folk Festival.

So, whether I happened to be living in Nashville at the time or not, I'd hear about the great times that people were having down there, and what a songwriter mecca it was. For the performers, aspirants, and the lovers of the diverse genre called folk, it was a chance to camp out with your friends, see a bunch of good shows, and then play music all night back at camp. Heaven, basically. But the amazing thing was that it went on for 18 days. People seemed to look forward to it all year.

Figured it was time this year to go check it out, and do a Kerrville issue of Puremusic. I was not prepared for how good it was going to be, how much fun I was going to have, or how it was going to actually change my life. The festival schedule ran from 5/24 thru 6/11. I knew that I had to move to a new house in Nashville on June 1st, and that you had to get there early to nail a good campsite, so I booked flights and got a ticket from 5/22 thru 5/30. (Actually, Vaughn Hafner was kind enough to comp me a pass for the time I had, based on the fact that I wanted to write about the festival in Puremusic.)

I emailed our friend Jerry Rutledge, he's the big daddy at Camp Nashville, which was definitely where I wanted to be, if there was room. Jerry goes down to do work weekends before the festival begins and gets there as early as he has to in order to reserve one of the few shady areas of the ranch, because it gets hotter than Hades down there. Jerry wrote back, said come on down, let's see what we can work out.

Two days before the first shows were scheduled, I flew down to San Antonio. Didn't want to rent a car, thought I'd do it seat-of-the pants hippie style, like the old days. Right. So I shuttled over to the Greyhound station from the airport. My Spanish is pretty good, so I informed the nice latina at the counter that I wanted to go to Kerrville. She told me that I'd missed the 1:00 bus by a half hour. "No hay problema, cuando sale la proxima?" ("No problem," I said, "when's the next one?") "8:45," she replied. "Oh shit," I blurted in English.

She said that sometimes guys came by in vans and gave people rides to places for a fee, that maybe I wanted to hang around across the street in the restaurant parking lot, seeing as I had some time on my hands. I had this huge duffel bag with a week's camping gear and my '85 Taylor guitar. I'm not a large person, and this duffel bag matched my height and weight pretty close, and had no wheels. Classic rookie move. Every time I hoisted it up on my shoulder, some guy near me would say "dude!"...or some such thing, and I hoped they were walking fast enough not to see me have to put it down after 10 steps. But that's all I needed to get across the street, and I found about six inches of shade under a new tree and parked myself.

Couple of enterprising guys in white vans did come by, but they had other more touristy destinations in mind: Eagle Pass, Two Rocks. No man, they weren't going out to Kerrville, not for thirty bucks, not for fifty. Oh well, about 6 pm I wandered back into the station, and bought a ticket to Kerrville. I've spent lots of time in Mexican bus stations all over that country, and so I just slipped into Mexican mode and talked with several older cats on my bench. They'd come up from Veracruz, headed for jobs their relatives had landed them in Dallas. They were both musicians, and seemed amused to talk a while with a gypsy gringo with his guitar and some chops in their mother tongue, and it helped pass the time for all of us waiting to get where we were going.

By the time I got to Kerrville, it was almost eleven. Too late for a taxi and no way to get out to the ranch, I was lucky to bum a ride from the bus station to the Motel 6. Inauspicious beginnings, I mused, but tomorrow's a fresh start. Nowhere to eat, I walked to the convenience store and bought some Fritos, a breakfast bar, and a diet Coke. I nearly fell into a drainage ditch on the dark walk back, but reached the room and fell asleep before I could even turn the TV on.

As my last rookie maneuver, I took a \$20 taxi 10 miles to the ranch in the morning, and got dropped off at the front gate. There were two young hippie girls and a buddy of mine from Asheville, NC playing guitar right at the entrance gate that said Welcome Home. Somehow I knew that everything was gonna be just fine from there on out.

Nobody had a VIP list yet, but the office was mellow about it, said come back tomorrow and we'll straighten it out. The people at the gate said I had to pay the toll, though, and pointed to my guitar case. So I played my first song, probably the first of 50 or 60 I would play that week. Then they pointed me in the direction of Camp Nashville, and I set out to meet up with Jerry. My buddy Michael Farr from Asheville stashed his guitar in a bush and helped me with the duffel bag.

We wound down a dusty road past RVs and camps of people and came to a meadow where I could see teepees and old Airstreams, and took a left at the tree line. Wow, this place is crawlin with renegades, I thought, I ought to fit in here all right. Definitely wasn't a church sponsored cookout where I'd have to watch my language around the kids or something, that's good. One more left up a little lane, and there was Jerry, under the shade of a mighty live oak covered with ball moss, getting the kitchen together. There was Jerry's old pickup with the camper and the kitchen structured in front, and something that felt like a shaded outside living room to the left, with six armless chairs in a circle. Wow, a song circle, nice.

In the midst of a toasty dustbowl, here we were in the shade, damn. There was a dry creek bed behind the kitchen and living room, and about 8 tents already set up. "Yeah, Tom Kimmel's already here, he set all those up. He went to get his buddy Chris Crawford at the airport. Here's your spot." He pointed to a blue tarp big enough for two tents in back of the picnic table, right up by the picking circle. I was in. Unbelievable, *now* I was home.

Okay, Tom Kimmel. He was a songwriter I really respected from Nashville. Folk pop, could write deep grooves and big songs that always seemed to have the thread of gospel woven in. Had that smoky voice that a reedy tenor like myself envied. Seemed like no matter how many cigarettes I smoked, I couldn't get that sound, so I'd quit. I didn't know how many hot songwriters were gonna be in our camp, and I hoped that one of those seats was going to be mine.

Michael and I threw up the tent I'd borrowed from songwriter Sally Barris in a couple of minutes, and set out meandering, so I could get the lay of the land. We were a couple of days in front of the oncoming throng, but there were already lots of camps, all the early birds nesting in the best spots.

Kerrville is Texas hill country, and the ranch had its share, and there were makeshift dwellings pitched behind every rock and bush. And music afoot, people picking and singing all kinds of music. Blues, bluegrass, old timey, folk. Already I was wondering why the hell it had taken me so long to check this out, I was already having such a good time, and I'd just arrived.

What I came to know over the next day or two was how incredibly lucky I'd been to have landed a spot in Camp Nashville. First of all, it was laced with really interesting and friendly spirited people, many of whom had been doing it together for 10 years or more. I'm indebted to Jerry Rutledge and all the happy campers for welcoming me in to a great circle of players and of family.

When we weren't playing our own tunes around Camp Nashville, there were great shows to see, and I enjoyed the small spectacle and drama of the New Folk competition. I'm not sure I like the idea of mixing music and competition, especially in the songwriting area, where it's so subjective. But the payoff for the winners is good, in terms of their resumes and sometimes a quick route to the Kerrville main stage. Almost none of the players I would have picked won New Folk and some omissions struck me as absolutely ludicrous. But I was a rookie, and I'm told that these kinds of reactions to the New Folk competition are totally normal and part of the total experience, so I took them in stride.

Besides the two outstanding live performers whose CDs are reviewed in this issue, I particularly enjoyed performances by Susan Werner, Celeste Krenz, Chris Smither, Dennis Kamakahi, and Jennifer Kimball. But all the shows I saw were well done, and some memorable. I was only there for a week, lots of people stay all 18 days. I didn't get the name of the sound company that were brought in from CO (who also do the Telluride Festival), but they were excellent. The food and craft concessions were really fun and well suited to the crowd in attendance.

But the music at Camp Nashville in the mid-morning and after midnight...I wasn't prepared for how good that would be, and it changed me. I was sorry that my very talented friend Kate Wallace wasn't there this year, but in our camp there were a number of great songwriters. Tom Kimmel, Chris Crawford, and Mindy Smith from Nashville,

Michael Lille from Boulder, Richard Berman from Amherst, MA, Max Cohen from Martha's Vineyard, and Johnsmith from Wisconsin. We were blessed with so many incredible singer songwriters that came by for days and nights of tunes I'll never forget. Enchanting women Annie Gallup from Ann Arbor and Louise Taylor from Brattleboro, David Lamotte, Steve Gillette, Dogwood Moon from Santa Monica, free spirited Annie Wenz, Libby Kirkpatrick, Bill Parsons and Eric Weinberg, Rachel Bissex, Janet Feld, Eleni Kelakos, Jennifer Agner from Hot Soup, heavenly singers Kristin DeWitt and Stephanie Corby, Jenny Reynolds, Vanessa Trien, Karen Irwin, Kevin Danzig, Suzanne McDermott, Al Day, Melissa Javors, the outrageous Eric Schwartz, and others that my blown mind fails to recall at this writing, my respectful apologies.

I was totally floored by the music of Chris Rosser and Tom Prasada-Rao, they made the circle even more magical when they were present, and both gave great stage performances at Kerrville. I will review the former's recent CD in this issue, and we'll do a story on Tom PR when his new one arrives. I also very much enjoyed the company of Robert Corwin, the esteemed photographer who's been chronicling the magic of music for decades. We hope to do a story on Robert in an upcoming issue.

In this Kerrville issue, we'll do CD reviews of knockout stage acts Willy Porter and Chris Rosser. Also, three reviews of records by Camp Nashville artists: Tom Kimmel, Michael Lille, and Johnsmith. Lastly, we'll cover the most recent release by Kate Wallace, a perennial favorite of this festival.

I can't fail to mention two performance artists that took my breath away, each in different ways. Chris Chandler and his partner Anne Feeney had an absolutely brilliant act that appeared in several guerrilla settings, and Tom Prasada-Rao also had Chris up for a beautiful number in his show. ("What if there were a great awakening of atoms, where they all remembered their vast and intricate histories? An atomic explosion of memory"...wow.)

And then Billy Jonas, from Asheville. Like an enlightened one man band, he took a croquet mallet and shattered a glass globe of the earth and reassembled it in hilarious rhythmic fashion with a song story about protein, eggs vs. bee pollen, Monica Lewinsky, and several other things, called "Primordial Ooze." We'll surely be covering the mindblowing work of Billy Jonas and Chris Chandler in upcoming issues.

The stars also came into alignment between myself and a great woman I'd been waiting on for a long time. I'd heard about ranch romances, and hoped the Texas moon would work a little magic for me, and it did. Good things really do come to those who wait, sometimes.

I'd like to thank Rod Kennedy and Vaughn Hafner for their fabulous festival and their gracious welcome, the warm and enthusiastic audiences that would gather around Camp Nashville by morning and night, and especially the fantastic musicians and friends that welcomed me so deeply into their hearts and their song circle. I look forward to seeing you all next year.

You can find out more about this fantastic folk festival, get on a mailing list or order tickets, and even hear music clips of live performances at their website.