

## HARDLY STRICTLY BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL

SF GOLDEN GATE PARK

OCTOBER 5, 2003



We managed to take in the last day of the totally free Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival in Golden Gate Park on Sunday. Man, were we blown away. So, apparently, were the organizers, who we understand featured top billed acts, supplied private shuttle transport and 30 porta-sans and who apparently made not one red cent with any anticipation of any return of any kind whatsoever.

Originally anticipating a smallish crowd of some 400 persons, the event pulled in 40,000 people on the less popular day.

Bluegrass, once the province of Grand Ole Opry parodies and the occasional closet connoisseur, plus a handful of isolated rural musicians has recently seen an upsurge in popularity as White Americans go now in search of

their roots, the roots they had disdained and abnegated during the me-first decades of the Reagan era. Movies, like "O Brother Wherefore Art Thou" have highlighted this new interest in origins, resulting in career revivals for the Long Neglected. Crossover bands and musicians have especially benefited by the recent nationalist resurgence.

Much dismayed, we learned too late about the bill for Saturday:

Steve Earle, Gillian Welch, Ricky Scaggs, and Joe Ely were among the plethora of bands hosting three stages in Speedway Meadows. Any one of which could nowadays be a mainliner on any of the main stages in the City, charging \$30 per head.

Steve Earle has earned considerable notoriety for his recent politically inflammatory "Jerusalem" and Gillian Welch has shown her hand in too many projects recently to mention, including artistic director of the *O Brother Wherefore Art Thou* film.

This was the first time we had managed to catch Willie Nelson live as well as the famous Emmylou Harris -- due to previously impecunious circumstances.

This time the entire crowd that had filled the meadows for the three stages gravitated to the main stage for the last two acts were the only ones that mattered. 40,000 people packed up to the proscenium.

Were we impressed? Willie played songs we did not know, but which were obvious old favorites with some, such as "Whiskey River". He also played old folkie standards such as "Me and Bobby McGee". Then there were the songs that stood out somehow, such as "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" and "On

the Road Again". What impressed us was a combination of sincerity about the music, genuine hooky melodies, and an obvious virtuosity with a variety of musical styles that encompassed bluegrass, country, folk and pop. We had no prior impressions of Mr. Nelson, but we found afterwards that his music and his approach to music to be infectious, attractive and energetic without a trace of pretentiousness or "yee-haw" obnoxiousness that is sometimes typical of "country style" music. It also was clear that 40,000 people of all ages heartily approved of his approach.



Nelson continues to play and record on the same guitar that he bought as a replacement for one he accidentally broke between gigs. The story goes that he stepped on the guitar to be used, and then had to call all around Memphis until a friend connected him with a shop that had only a classical Martin for sale which could be made ready in time for the evening performance. This particular model, designed for soft fingerpicking of Bach and Brahms had no pickguard.

Willie simply asked at the time, "Is it a good guitar?" and the shop owner, of course, stated, "It is a Martin and therefore is an excellent guitar."

As you can see from the photo, the lack of a pickguard has done some damage to the soundboard. Several people have attempted repairs but Nelson has refused to replace the guitar for some 35 years and the guitar has acquired a personality all its own, quite well known in acoustic circles.

Emmylou Harris had the unenviable position of closing a very popular show that featured gorgeous weather as the fogs descended in fading light to chill the crowd. Her band was top notch and she deserved much better treatment than that. At one point, she congratulated people for staying, despite the chill and begged them to stay a bit longer. This is a performer with an extraordinary voice of significant power, who has seen quite a lot of history and who has a crack backup band. Her material ranged from the ethereal to crunching three-chord rock n roll and she never missed a beat during her energetic performance. We would look forward to hearing her in a warmer atmosphere. The lead guitarist, Buddy Miller, turned her "One Time in Babylon" into a very tasty piece.



There was someone there who professed a dislike of music and an admiration for the Queens of the Stone Age, one of those generic thrash-core bands that are guitar-bass-drum based and so there was some antipathy to the music presented.

I can think of better things to do than spend your Sunday afternoon listening to music you do not understand, do not appreciate and do not like and wonder why any idiot would do such a thing, but then, I am a curious person. 40,000 people seemed to really enjoy it. My enjoyment was disturbed slightly only by the arrogance of people who did not seem to want to be there in the first place. We can only say, please go away and do not bother us any more.

Let us say for the record that the weekend of the first week of October, 2003 was filled with peace and music and love and it was all a good thing. A guy stopped by with a case and gave us a couple of Coronas and life was good for a while. Imagine that: a guy hands you a couple of beers to share what he has and tells you, "Just enjoy."

We returned to the Island satisfied and happy. For those who choose to remember only the bad things, let sorrow be their master.

(Original photos from Island-Life staff photogs)