

Woody Guthrie Folk Festival Okemah, Oklahoma July 13 – 17

The Woody Guthrie Folk Festival staged in Guthrie's hometown of Okemah, a community of 3000 that swells to more than double that over the course of the festival, continues its tradition of being free apart from the opening night fund-raising concert. Musicians and fans from across the world converge during the height of summer, to celebrate Guthrie's legacy as one of the most significant musicians in the history of folk music. Guthrie wrote thousands of lyrics, giving a voice to the disenfranchised, standing up for the common man and generally getting under the skin of those in authority. His influence upon modern day musicians (Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Steve Earle, Billy Bragg and Jeff Tweedy) is not in doubt and the openers on Wednesday night at Cain's Ballroom, Tulsa, David Crosby and Graham Nash, have not been exactly backward in using song as a way of railing against social injustice.

'An Evening with David Crosby and Graham Nash' was an intimate performance, their first all acoustic show in some twenty years. Accompanied by Crosby's son James on piano, they took the stage, Nash barefooted, to a standing ovation. Beginning with *Wasted On The Way* and working their way through a wide body of material, sharing lead vocals, harmonising beautifully, they showed why over the past forty years they have become so beloved of the music world. Particular highlights included *Guinnevere* 'one of the prettiest love songs ever written, thank you for writing that for me, David' *Wooden Ships* dedicated to Master of Ceremonies, Bill McCloud, which 'kept him alive' during service in Vietnam and *Teach Your Children* 'for all the underpaid teachers' (a much appreciated dedication given that many of the festival volunteers are teachers, facing cuts in education budgets as the economy continues to bite). Joel Rafael who has performed at every one of the previous 13 festivals was invited to share the stage for his (protest) song *This Is My Country*, one that Nash loved when he first heard it and covers regularly. Rafael performed his own festival set; the pre-eminent interpreter of Guthrie's material with a new album due in January, he showcased material from that as well as paying homage to Guthrie with *Way Over Yonder In The Minor Key* and *Dance Around My Atom Fire*. Rafael also covered *Go Tell The Saviour* by Jack Hardy, who passed away this year. Hardy's contribution to folk music and his championing of young singer-songwriters was further recognised in a tribute set led by Karen Mal.

Mal (on mandolin and vocals) also accompanied Ronny Cox during a radio taping during which he talked about the creative process of songwriting. That gave us a fascinating insight into his approach not only to writing but also to being an interpretative artist. The most moving of performances during the festival was his own composition *Against The Wishes Of My Heart* a tribute to his late wife Mary. The first ever performance of so personal a song was at the taping and the second at his festival set the following day. I

observed many being moved to tears by this song. Yes, Cox is also a well-known actor but there is no doubt about the warmth and sincerity of his musicianship and the stories that punctuate his singing.

Also accompanying Cox was accordionist and piano player Radoslav Lorkovic the 'go to guy' when musicians need someone to spice things up a little and his presence was

ubiquitous. Many called upon his services such as Ellis Paul with whom he has appeared many times. Paul's set incorporated old favourites *Maria's Beautiful Mess* and *3000 Miles*, during which Shawn Mullins made a guest appearance. A new song *Kick Out The Lights* inspired by Johnny Cash once kicking out 56 lights at the Grand Ole Opry, and covers of *Cryin'* in tribute to what would have been Roy Orbison's 75th birthday year and Guthrie's *Way Over Yonder In The Minor Key* also featured. Collaborating with Paul was his long-time sideman Don Conoscenti. He is another festival regular and his own set with Patrick Turnmire on percussion, Dan Daily on saxophone and Terry 'Buffalo' Ware on guitar, was a joy to behold. Conoscenti is one of the most underrated and under-appreciated musicians; his own body of work deserves much greater recognition. A multi-instrumentalist whose rendition of his own composition *The Other Side* received a standing ovation even though it was in the middle of his set. His version of Guthrie's *Vigilante Man* compares with the best you will ever hear and his cover of Sam Baker's *Juarez* was done in the spirit of close friendship; Baker had to cancel his scheduled performance due to eye surgery and was much missed this year.

Slaid Cleaves made a return to the festival after a five-year absence. He opened with three drinking songs *Hard to Believe*, *Horseshoe Lounge* and *Drinkin' Days* 'to get settled in' before moving



David Crosby & Graham Nash

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on with a pair of his co-writes with Rod Picott, *Black T-Shirt* and *Rust Belt Fields*. Cleaves' appearance coincided with what would have been Guthrie's 99th Birthday so in acknowledgement he played Springsteen's *Johnny '99* and Guthrie's *Poor Boy*. Undoubtedly a popular addition to the roster, I'm sure many hope that he doesn't leave it another five years before returning. Closing out the day of the 99th birthday celebration was regional favourite Stoney LaRue. His third consecutive appearance was, it is fair to say, met with some grumbling amongst the more traditional folk music fans but there is no doubt in my mind that it is right to invite a performer who brings in a young fan base. Over the course of the festival, almost 60 performances were scheduled so there is plenty to choose from, indeed there is almost too much to choose from as inevitably one's favourite musicians will have clashing slots.

Festival debutantes included Shawn Mullins who headlined Friday night's proceedings. Accompanied by guitarist Patrick Blanchard, Mullins' signature gravelly vocals were given full vent on *Light You Up*, *Shimmer* and *Beautiful Wreck*. The number one hit *Lullaby* launched his mainstream career in the late 1990s prior to which he paid his dues by playing small clubs and barely scraping a living. Now a seasoned entertainer he captivated the crowd and won many new fans as he delivered a polished performance. Gretchen Peters with pianist Barry Walsh was also making her first appearance here. Her recent UK tour included Glastonbury and she likened that festival to this commenting that 'instead of mud, only dust' which endeared her to the crowd. An eight-song set included *Circus Girl*, *Guadalupe* as well as new material and a cover of Guthrie's *Pastures Of Plenty* for which she drew upon the services of guitarist Andrew Hardin. Peters is well-known for penning material covered by amongst others Martina McBride, Trisha Yearwood and George Strait. She played *On A Bus To St Cloud* remarking that Jimmy LaFave (final night headliner) had recorded a beautiful version but although she hadn't checked to see if he would be playing it later, she considered that as she had written it, it was okay to sing it!

Jude Johnstone is also known for her songwriting and her debut here was a rare treat. Backed by LaFave's band she played a ten-song set incorporating songs covered by Bonnie Raitt (*Wounded Heart*), Trisha Yearwood (*Hearts In Armor*) and Johnny Cash (*Unchained*). Her fifth album *QUIET GIRL* sees her return to more Americana flavoured material and features a guest appearance by the late E Street Band member, Clarence Clemons, who was responsible for giving Johnstone her first break in the music industry. Somewhat of a father and son theme ran through the festival; first we had Butch Hancock's son 13 year old Rory, accompany him and then Kevin Welch's shared billing with his son, Dustin.

Hancock started off (solo) experimenting with songs not previously played—Guthrie's *Lindbergh* and a song that had a decided political bent *In The Wake Of The Death Of Osama Bin Laden*. He followed up with *Between Wars* and then *Blind Boys*. After four songs, his son Rory, Rory's school buddy Parker Crowley and veteran guitarist Butch Morgan, joined him. Their first song together was Townes Van Zandt's *Waitin' Around To Die*; the irony

of two teenagers singing this was not lost on the audience. A nine-song set closed out with *If You Were A Bluebird*. Hancock is a master of his art and has never been afraid to voice his opinions through song and comes closest to emulating Guthrie's sparse lyrical style. Conversely he is equally at ease writing songs that are 'a hundred miles long' and is widely regarded as one of the best contemporary American songwriters.

Kevin Welch's 2010 critically acclaimed *A PATCH OF BLUE SKY* was a personal favourite and having been at his London show late last year, it was wonderful to hear him perform material from that collection once again. He alternated with son Dustin whose own compositions included *After The Music*, *Two Horses* and *Whisky Priest*. Father and son had decided on a set list but found that they had more time so took a request—*Pushing Up Daisies*. Also channelling Guthrie with *Vigilante Man* meant that we heard it two days running—no complaints here!

Michael Fracasso's recent *SAINT MONDAY* recorded with fan-funding support, has a wonderfully retro 1960s feel about it. Such an incisive writer he is another who should be a much bigger star. A particular favourite with the organisers, he was accompanied by guitarist Ware, leader of the house band, and played to a very appreciative audience. Kicking off with *1950s* he mixed his set with old and new material closing with *While The Night Is Young* and encoring with *Eloise* from the new release. Other highlights included Stonehoney who rocked out their set with *White Knuckle Wind*. David Amram, at 80 years old performing with the enthusiasm of someone half that age. John Wort Hannam returning for a second time by fan request. Local boy John Fullbright playing to a packed auditorium; everyone is looking forward to his debut studio CD currently in the works. His *LIVE AT THE BLUE DOOR* showcased his extraordinary talent and he is a young man of enormous potential.

Jimmy LaFave who has headlined this annual festival more times than any other artist did so again. He, together with his band, mixed his set list with covers and original material. He invited Butch Hancock to join him for a Hancock song, without telling him which one he was about to perform but they executed *Leo and Leona* perfectly. For his last three numbers, LaFave invited all the musicians who were backstage to join him for *Oklahoma Hills*, *Everybody Get Together* and the traditional closer *This Land Is Your Land*. Ending with 'see you next year for Woody's 100th birthday' LaFave issued an open invitation to everyone for 2012. He will be there, of that there is no doubt!

Lunchtime Sunday sees the 'Hootenanny', which doubles up as a fundraiser for the Huntington's Disease Society and a thank-you for the volunteers who have worked tirelessly over the preceding days and not had a chance to listen to the music. Under the direction of Ware, the house band supported 23 different performers who each sang one song. The traditional finale to send everyone on their way was *Woody's Road* written by the late Bob Childers. There endeth the 14th annual festival—always special, always friendly and always full of good music. Next year sees Guthrie's centenary and that celebration will be extra special. Save the dates July 11–15, 2012.

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