

Cuz's Corner

By Dennis Frost

As always, I'd like to welcome one and all to another edition of Cuz's Corner. I feel like I was much the road warrior last month in having packed in two festivals in successive weeks in April. I can't believe that I had never been to the **Shakori Hills GrassRoots Festival** before and I must admit that I was pretty much blown away with this year's experience. Not only does the festival take place on a breathtakingly beautiful piece of farmland, but it also has friendly, warm feeling to it. This is a grassroots festival in every sense of the word! Obviously, music is the centerpiece of the weekend, but I was equally impressed with all the workshops and activities revolving around not only nourishing the human spirit, but also those emphasizing how to better respect our precious planet. After checking in, we were immediately part of a huge Earth Day parade on the way to our first stage complete with huge paper mache puppets. This is a relatively small, compact festival with two music stages, a huge dance stage, and a children's stage all in close proximity to one another. Also, unlike so many festivals, the food was excellent with many healthy and veggie options available. Shakori Hills also goes to great lengths to minimize its carbon imprint by offering recycling and requiring all food vendors to use compostable plates, cups, and silverware. Musical highlights this year included Celtic/Gypsy power house **Scythian**, **Crooked Still** (old-time chamber music), **Bela Fleck** with **Casey Driessen**, **Abigail Washburn** and friends, and a mind-blowing set by Mali's **Bassekou Kouyate and Ngoni Ba**, who were part of Bela's **Throw Down Your**

Heart project last year. Bassekou's band consisted of four players of ngonis (lute-like precursors to the banjo) of varying size and pitch, three percussionists, and a vocalist. I absolutely love traditional African music and catch it whenever I have the opportunity, but I've never experienced anything as amazing as this. Mr. Bassekou is on the same level on the ngoni as Mr. Fleck, who joined the proceedings, is on banjo – enough said! I would highly recommend the two-hour trip to Shakori Hills Farm, which is just outside of Siler City. In addition to spring and fall GrassRoots Festivals, there is an old-time bluegrass and fiddler's convention in September for your enjoyment in this beautiful section of North Carolina! (www.sharorihills.org)

I know this is sounding like a travelogue, but the following Thursday it was up to Wilkesboro for the "big daddy" of them all, **MerleFest**. As all of you who have been to this festival can attest, there are so many musical offerings that it would take the entire newsletter to review it, but there were a few highlights. I really enjoyed the **Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers** set way more than I thought I would. The mix of music and satire was just about perfect, and Steve's banjo playing was definitely worthy of the Watson Stage. The set was capped off with a bluegrass version of Steve Martin's classic **King Tut**, leaving a

smile on thousands of faces as the sun slipped behind the mountains! As usual, the highlight for a large percentage of the attendees was the annual **Waybacks' Album Hour**, where the band and special guests perform a classic album all the way through. I think half of the fun is guessing what exactly the album will be. Well, this year we were treated to **The Beatles' Abbey Road** with special guests Jerry Douglas, Jens Kruger, Jim Lauderdale, Elvis Costello, and the incredible vocals of Sarah Dugas of **The Duhks**. It's true that **The Waybacks** usually

nail the album, but I do think the energy of this "happening" is another factor that brings folks back to the Hillside Stage year after year. Of course, the two sets I heard with **Doc Watson** were exceptional, especially the Sunday gospel set with the **Nashville Bluegrass Band**. I always enjoy hearing artists live for the first time and this year provided several opportunities.

I absolutely loved the three-part harmonies of **Red Molly** from New England and their take on contemporary folk music and more traditional material. This all-female band has a wonderful new recording, **James**, that I would highly recommend. This CD has, I think, a perfect balance of original songs, fine covers, and traditional material. (www.redmolly.com) Another artist I just happened on at the Cabin Stage proved to be one of the most unique performers I've heard of late. **Harry Manx** laid down a set of mostly original music that I would describe as combining folk, blues, country, and classical Indian music within an addictive J. J. Cale-style groove. Harry totally captivated me when he pulled out his sitar/guitar clone – really cool stuff! The new Harry Manx record-



"Cuz" and Little Bit

ing is entitled **Bread Buddha** and is highly recommended for those that are tired of the same ole, same ole! (www.harrymanx.com) As usual, MerleFest was a blast but also was a tiring four-day affair. The only compliant I would have is the fact that the folks at MerleFest really need to get with the plan and reduce the immense carbon imprint it leaves behind. Like Shakori Hills, many festivals are getting serious about not only what food is served on, but are also getting into composting as opposed to taking those mountains of garbage to the landfill. Hopefully, MerleFest will begin doing a better job with this important aspect in the coming years.

Thanks to one of our board members who has recently discovered the amazing mix of contemporary folk, traditional folk, '60s folk, and roots/Americana found on Folk Alley's internet stream, I have become a fan all over again. If you have yet to find this jewel of a radio station, I would highly recommend you go to www.folkalley.com!

Before we close, there are two more CDs I'd like to turn you guys on to. **Darrell Scott** has a new two-disc set of wonderful songs that is highly recommended. There aren't too many songwriters that have the whole package: being incredible singers and instrumentalists, in addition to their song craft. Darrell is one of them. The first disc is mostly acoustic with the artist backing himself up on multiple instruments with the second adding more layers to the mix. The name of the project is **Crooked Road** and is a must for all of you Darrell Scott fans, as well as newcomers. It doesn't get any better than a slew of new tunes from the one and only Darrell Scott!

Also recommended highly is the

new one from the super bluegrass band, **The Infamous Stringdusters**. This is probably among the best touring bands today and **Things That Fly** should convince you of that. These are not only powerful instrumentalists and singers, but they can also write a great song – my favorite bluegrass CD of the year! See what the buzz is about on May 20th at the Visulite Theater. (www.maxxmusic.com)

That's about it for this month and I surely hope all the traveling didn't wear you out. Be sure to check out **Notorious** at the May 14th CFS Gathering - blending old-time, Celtic, Gypsy, and many other styles. (See the article in the newsletter.) Have a great May!

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To share with Cuz about your favorite music, contact him at 704-532-8846 or
