

Cuz's Corner: Nashville Edition

By Dennis Frost

Welcome to another edition of Cuz's Corner. It's been a long, hot, stormy summer and these cooler days and slightly chilly evenings are certainly a welcomed relief!

If you are like me, from time to time your coffee table gets cluttered with travel magazines with articles about exotic destinations around the globe most of us can't afford to visit, especially in today's economy. Well, for a true music fan, there is no destination more exotic than a trip to Nashville. Unfortunately, far too many folks associate Nashville with what has gone wrong in country music, but if one digs a bit deeper, one will find one of the true epicenters of roots music in this country and it's only one state away. In fact, most of my previous week was spent in Nashville at the Americana Music Association's annual conference and festival. It's a long drive past the Smokies and over the Cumberland mountains, but because of the open skies and the outstanding scenery, the trip to "Music City" goes by rather quickly and is quite pleasant, which is more than I can say about the drive back after a stimulating, but tiring four-day conference.

Great music festivals abound all over the country, but one of the main reasons I go back year after year is not only the community and friendships forged, but the fact that this long weekend digs quite a bit deeper into the essence of this music than your average festival. This year's conference featured keynote interviews with Rodney Crowell and T-Bone Burnett, for example, and an excellent program by the First Amendment Center

(www.firstamendmentcenter.org) called "Freedom Sings," a chronological history of music and its relationship to free speech issues. I also very much enjoyed a tribute to Blind Alfred Reed through both monologue and songs performed by the **Carpenter Ants**, John Lilly, Charlie McCoy, Kathy Mattea, Kenny Malone, and Tim O'Brien. Thanks to Tim, who put this delightful program together with fellow West Virginia performers, I now know a great deal more about the history and wide-ranging influences of this Mountain State icon. The AMA has partnered with the Country Music Hall of Fame to present programs like this in the beautiful, intimate, and acoustically pleasing Ford Theatre and special, short concerts like Saturday's Jerry Douglas performance on the small gift shop stage.

If you have never been to the Country Music Hall of Fame and are intrigued by the history and artifacts from the embryonic era of country music, this is a "no miss" while in Nashville - I can't believe this was my first visit! We happened on an exceptional Kitty Wells exhibit and were mesmerized by displays ranging from Mother Maybelle's guitar to Elvis Presley's gold Cadillac. I would allow at least half a day as the early country, old time, and bluegrass on the third floor will take at least two hours if you are like me!

But back to the AMA conference - through the day there are many in-the-round sessions by various artists. I love these sessions, as they

are very much a window into the hearts and souls of both writers and instrumentalists. (I really miss these sessions at MerleFest and suppose their demise is a product of growing pains.) All through the day, there are many panel discussions helpful to musicians, radio folks, and plain old music lovers alike. The tendency is to want to sleep in after an evening of showcase performances, but daytime activities are so compelling that

I find myself back at it by 10:30 next morning. Hey, you can sleep at home!

As evening approaches, the emphasis shifts to live music sessions by the best of the best in American roots music. Evenings are intense and

run into the next day, so I would recommend for participants to take their vitamins and pace themselves, because this is literally a musical feast and not for the faint of heart! The first two evenings got started in style at the historical Ryman Auditorium with an unbelievable Levon Helm Ramble and, of course, the annual AMA awards show on Thursday night. These Levon Helm shows are properly named, as they tend to ramble from one roots genre to another and include a literal parade of special guests. This Ramble featured Sam Bush, Buddy Miller, John Hiatt, Steve Earl, Allison Moorer, Alison Krauss, Robert Plant, Sheryl Crow, **Ollabelle**, Larry Campbell and too many more to remember. To those of you that came to our **Polecat Creek** Gathering, I must mention that our friend Laurelyn Dossett's song **Annabelle** was not only cov-



Cuz and Little Bit

ered in unaccompanied trio fashion at the Ramble, but also the next night at the awards show. Levon's story is one of a survivor and about the healing power of music. Most of you know I go to quite a few shows, but I can't ever recall the intense energy shared on this special night between artist and audience. The next night at the awards show, we were treated to more of the same passionate performances backed by Buddy Miller and his all-star band, which included the great Dennis Crouch on bass and lifetime AMA instrumentalist Larry Campbell on all things stringed. A personal highlight was Joan Baez's acceptance of the First Amendment Center's Freedom of Speech Award and her subsequent performance of **Day After Tomorrow**, the title track off her latest Steve Earl-produced disc. I have to say that after all these years Joan can still move mountains with that voice. The man that stole the show, however, was gospel singer Mike Farris, singing **Mary Don't You Weep**, backed up by a nine-piece band complete with a horn section and the amazing **McCrary Sisters**. Mike is one of the most dynamic performers and singers I've heard live in years and words cannot describe what I saw and heard both at the Ryman and at his showcase the next night. For a complete listing of winners at the awards show, go to www.americanamusic.org. Amazing performances also abounded at showcase performances around Nashville and my favorites included **The Steeldrivers**, Bruce Robison, **Crooked Still**, Kathy Mattea, and yet another amazing show by Buddy Miller. (There will be a new Buddy and Julie Miller disc out early next year – yes!) There are also many off-site events going on during AMA weekend and Darrell Scott's CD release party at Douglas Corner with an all-star cast was also amazing. As I

write this, I am going through withdrawal and I am seeking therapy from you the reader – I appreciate your indulgence!

Nashville is an inspiring destination for any true music fan. In addition to ongoing performances at the Ryman, the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Station Inn (bluegrass), Tootsie's (across the alley from the Ryman, where Hank and others imbibed before performances), you just don't know who will be playing at venues all over town. There has been talk among CFS board members that it would be cool to take a bus to Nashville for a long weekend centered around a Ryman performance and perhaps a bluegrass show at the world famous Station Inn. By day, we could absorb ourselves in the history of this town, hit the vintage record and poster stores, tour the CMHF museum and, by night, visit Nashville's great local eateries, catch shows, and go honky-tonkin'! So, if any of you would be interested in such an adventure, just contact me or another board member so we can gauge how much interest there might be for such a trip. This is just fantasy at this stage, but if there is enough interest among members, who knows!

These are scary times for touring musicians with the economy and fuel prices and shortages. Do try to support your favorite artists when they come to town so we can keep them on the road and keep live music flowing. Next month we'll be talking about new releases from **Old Crow Medicine Show**, Taj Mahal, **Charlie Haden Family and Friends**, and others.

Yours in music,
Cuz

To share with Cuz about your favorite music or your interest in a Nashville trip, contact him at 704-532-8846 or dcmfrost@mindspring.com.

AgentBecky.com