

If you like bluegrass music... by Diane Reid

When this festival was just a glint in our eyes, we each had our own dreams for it. Some wanted the best bluegrass bands in the world to come to Northern Saskatchewan. Others wanted a festival where acoustic music lovers could play together, all day if they wished, and meet other amateur and professional musicians. Some wanted to enjoy traditional SK music. Most wanted a blend of the above. And all of us wanted to be part of a group of people who were down-to-earth, who loved live music and the northern forest, and who loved working together in the grand Saskatchewan traditions of co-operation and selflessness.

When this festival actually happened for the first time last year, we found an audience - you! - who are kind, fun, and helpful. We found that the professional musicians at the festival were just as kind and fun and helpful and down-to-earth as the audience. We found this music really does bring the intimacy of the living room or the kitchen to the stage.

We also found that the prairies are home to some of the best bluegrass and traditional musicians in Canada. And we found out that American bluegrass bands are very expensive. That pure bluegrass Canadian bands are hard to find. Plus, we found that there are as many definitions of bluegrass and old-time music as there are banjo players. Which is actually quite a lot.

So, recently I asked a number of local acoustic music lovers what their definition of bluegrass is. And I'll bet you are not surprised to find that I got many different answers.

When we attend a concert like Hungry Hill, we all easily agree "That's bluegrass!" But even the bluegrass band Restless Lester could arouse questions ... is Beatles played Bluegrass really bluegrass? And aren't the Lesters a little too much like the new grass bands that were sprouting up in the 70's. Bela Fleck was once new grass, but some of the stuff that the Flecktones play is not even new grass, maybe its cubist? Or post-modern?

One thing everyone I talked to agreed on is the kind of instruments that are always in a bluegrass band. Yes, there is always a mandolin. Always a banjo. A stand-up bass. An acoustic guitar. Fiddle. More than one singing voice! Stacked harmonies ... And the instrumentalists take turns. The music is structured: yet true bluegrass musicians always leave room for improvising

Bluegrass music NEVER has a drum kit, an electric guitar, xylophones, bongos ...

Flutes?

Bluegrass music always has "blue" notes. That is, the minor third and major seventh note of a scale are included. To put it another way, Bluegrass is played in modes other than the ones we hear in our day to day lives in pop and classical music, modes which sound a bit like the blues. And Bluegrass often stretches the limits of phrasing within the time structures most of us are used to listening to. What do I mean by that? I mean songs with the high lonesome sound of Man of Constant Sorrow, where Ralph Stanley sings like he is keening from a world where primeval emotions are stronger than the one two three four, one two three four beat of most of the music we listen to in North America.

Bluegrass can be in a major key or a minor key. Which basically means it can sound happy or sad, and often both at the same time.

And although Bluegrass springs from traditional Irish, Scottish, and English music as well as the blues, jazz, and perhaps Cajun music, it never sounds like Irish music, or Scottish music. It doesn't sound like the blues or like rock.



When it is well played, it sounds like nothing else in the world: fast, intricate, fun, complicated, and simple all at the same time.

Acoustic, and Irresistible.

Good bluegrass bands are few and far between. Until recently, the market for Bluegrass was relatively small, making it difficult for musicians to make a living out of playing pure Bluegrass. Many Bluegrass bands play other types of music, and many country bands include Bluegrass in their sets, because they love this music. Today, hardcore Bluegrass bands are taking bookings two years in advance, making it difficult for a small festival to get enough Bluegrass to feed hungry audiences.

Plus, Saskatchewan is a little far away from Tennessee, and California. Even coming from British Columbia or Southern Ontario costs quite a lot of money. This year we hired every bluegrass band we could afford that was available. We've learned that some bands have to be booked well in advance, and now we have already booked bluegrass bands for 2008 . And we hope, with your support, to be able to afford to bring in the best bluegrass in the world, in the future. To play on stage alongside the great musicians who live on the prairies and in B.C. And we are lucky to have great bluegrass talents living in Saskatchewan and Alberta, here at this festival, to play for you and with you.