

HSBF
SPEEDWAY MEADOWS, SF
OCTOBER 04, 2009

Various Island-Life staffers stumped on over to Babylon for the annual Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, eighth in lineage this time.

The HSBF began life as a sort of strictly bluegrass conference indoors in the classrooms of a local college in downtown Babylon as a reflection of the musical passion of its patron, a certain Warren Hellman, who is both financier and banjo enthusiast. It quickly grew sufficiently to warrant outdoor venues so Warren set up a stage in Speedway Meadows in Golden Gate Park and paid for all the park fees, the sanitation, the security and the costs of the musicians to attend. Of course you would not have any self-respecting bluegrass lover traipsing around linoleum and fluorescent lights -- what's called for is grass between the toes and blue skies above.

Enough bluegrass lovers loved that sort of thing to flock to this festival in greater numbers, and so the stages morphed into three, then four, then five and now as of this year, six stages of music, with concessions, port-o-jons, sanitation, security, sophisticated amplification and sound mixing boards added to the stacks of amps and whatnot and Warren still paying for all of it just to have a

party to host his friends for free in the park for about three days and Emmylou Harris winding up ending the festival purely by default each year, making her own tradition in the process. Of course the strictly bluegrass rule fell by the wayside, which is typical with rules among bluegrass folks and the stages began to host a more diverse selection of American music.

Along the way, the few dozen bluegrass students swelled into something like one hundred thousand folks coming into the park from all over the world just to take part in this event and our man Warren just as chipper as a chipmunk hopping on a log about all the music and goings on. He has actually performed on a stage or two but usually prefers to sit back and enjoy the sight of other's joy.

Some estimates put the weekend attendance at somewhere near 750,000 people, easily putting the HSBF well over the top as the largest outdoor festival of any kind in the United States.

ELIZA GILKYSON

So it was we trundled on over to catch the very first act for Saturday, Eliza Gilkyson. Eliza is SoCal born, but based now out of Austin, Texas. Recording serious music since 1969, "born under a bad sign" could have been her signature song as one signed label after another folded, along with a marriage or two before success arrived. Not until 2004's "Land of Milk and Honey" did she manage to forge together the earned and learned cynicism together with some critical recognition and serious airplay.



"Far across the world, a woman straps explosives to her chest / and walks into a shopping mall / a life devoid of sympathy or any tenderness / is hardly any life at all" she sings on that CD in *Tender Mercies*, a song about women trying to find some foundation of belief in an often chaotic and violent world.

The effects of the political climate over the past few years has given impetus to her work and we expect that the past few years of repression and severe

authoritarian obnoxiousness will result in a burgeoning of a number of artist's careers. That is usually the way it goes.

Saturday she pulled out the stops during the most unenviable slot at any festival anywhere, numero uno and first in the day before noon on a side stage, and we can say that she performed admirably. She was tight, she was controlled and she was on the note at every moment with precision. She also persuaded a member of our team to go and buy two of her most recent CD's, a staffer who had no prior knowledge of her work. Now that is showmanship.

ODDMAN EVERYMAN

During the shift from one stage to another we encountered one of the festival's Curiosities, Der Silbermann, a fellow decked out in the outfit as seen here, complete with a voice projection system.



People of all kinds are welcome to the HSBF, even, um, "metalheads".

BUDDY MILLER

After this fellow, we found ourselves at the brand new Gold Tower Stage, which was owned and dominated by Buddy Miller in all of his Blues Glory. Buddy rocked, blasted, bluesed and sashayed before a packed crowd at the new "6th stage".



In addition to releasing several solo albums over the years, Miller has toured as lead guitarist/backing vocalist for Emmylou Harris's Spyboy band, Steve Earle on his El Corazon tour, Shawn Colvin, and Linda Ronstadt. He co-produced and performed on Jimmie Dale Gilmore's 2000 album *Endless Night*. He has also appeared on several albums by songwriter/singer Lucinda Williams. In recent times, he has performed with all of the usual HSBF suspects, including

Emmylou Harris, Patty Griffin, Gillian Welch, and David Rawlings. Shawn Colvin was a singer during the early years of his band.

After touring with Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, Miller suffered a heart attack in Baltimore on 19 February 2009 following his performance as part of the MammoJam Music Festival and underwent triple bypass surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital, so it can be said that Miller is a true Blues survivor.

After a few hard rocking numbers spaced by some surprisingly good gospel blues, he welcomed none other than Robert Plant up on stage. Plant was buffed and healthy looking, clearly enjoying his moment on stage and we have to say that his vocals demonstrated far more diversity and range than ever we experienced during his screaming Led Zepplin days. While the period with Alison Krauss may have been an odd mismatch, we have to give the man credit for pursuing musical arts in new directions, something from which the new kids on the block could learn much. Robert clearly was enjoying himself as he swung the mike around by its cord, grinning like a kid getting away with swiping four Mars Bars from the 7/11.





Not content with a visit by one of Rock's star icons, Buddy welcomed Emmylou Harris up on the increasingly windy stage.



Due to various snafus and the increasingly packed crowd, which had to have smashed all record numbers for attendance by that point, we missed both Jorma Kaukonen and Boz Scaggs, both performing at the notoriously narrow and difficult to approach Rooster Stage. It may be said that for this stage, if you are not there with a posted space at eight o'clock in the morning and cannot climb trees, you simply will not see whomever performs there, due to the narrow defile of the area in front of the stage.

It was becoming so packed with humanity by the afternoon that we moved with Sister Bea back to our blanket spot in front of the Banjo Stage, earning several testy "F-You!s and A--hole B---! in the process just returning to our belongings.

STEVE MARTIN

Steve Martin, yes he of Roxanne and Pennies from Heaven and many, many standup comedy routines came on to play the banjo and perform with a rather good bluegrass group called the Steep Canyon Rangers.



Martin can do many things well -- he is a consummate entertainer. But what he does best is turn a phrase or line up a cutting rejoinder with intelligence, or abruptly turn the entire course of a play on its head with a few gestures and a certain intonation. He can also play the banjo quite well and can compose music for it that is enjoyable. But the main spot on the main stage on one of the most prestigious music festivals in the world? Welllll.... Perhaps genius has some limits.

He doe look good in a hat and a spotless sportcoat.



THE OLD 97s

From the packed sea of human flesh that occupied the Banjo Stage area, we trundled to the further corners of the festival and were lucky to catch the Old 97s, the kind of act that really gives zest to the festival. The Old 97s are full-bore jumping up and down, energetic downstroke punk rockers and they performed entirely well.

The band almost was a casualty of the Music Biz in that their label, Elektra, was acquired by Time Warner and so the band on the cusp of success was subsequently dropped after a merger with AOL. As a result, you probably have never heard of them.



If that should not make you furious about corporate greed in music, nothing will. They definitely got a bum rap and have been fighting back ever since with hard hitting alt-country music that is getting edgier by the day.

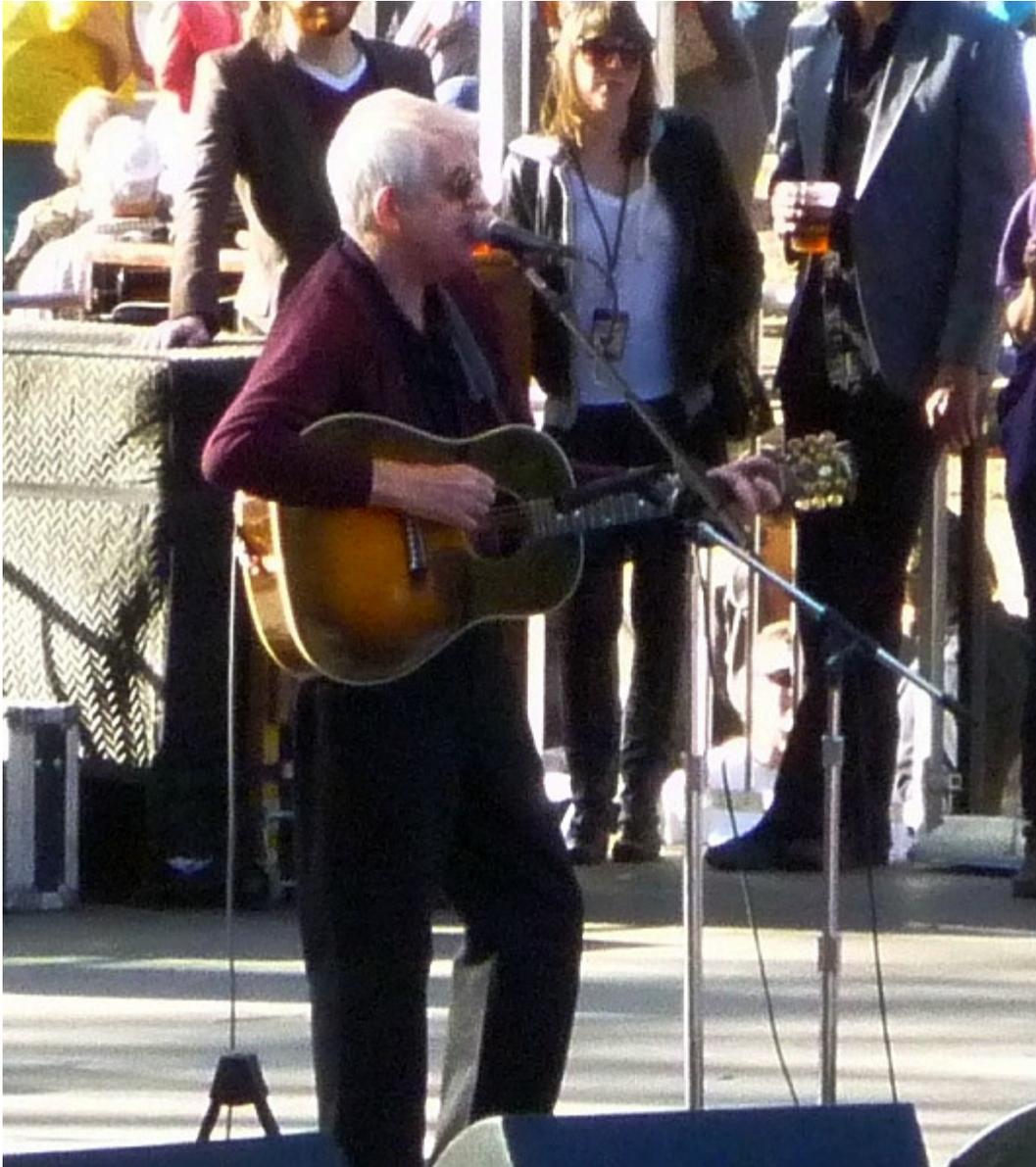
They were joined during an energetic set by Exene Cervenka of the punk band known as X.



NICK LOWE

If you have not heard of Nick Lowe you have been stone deaf for about 40 years, no matter who you are. For that long he has been recording well-received albums from his base in England. Along with vocals, Lowe plays guitar, bass guitar, piano and harmonica. He is best known for his songs "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding" (a hit for Elvis Costello), "Cruel to Be

Kind" (a U.S. Top 40 single), and "I Love the Sound of Breaking Glass", as well as his production work with Costello.



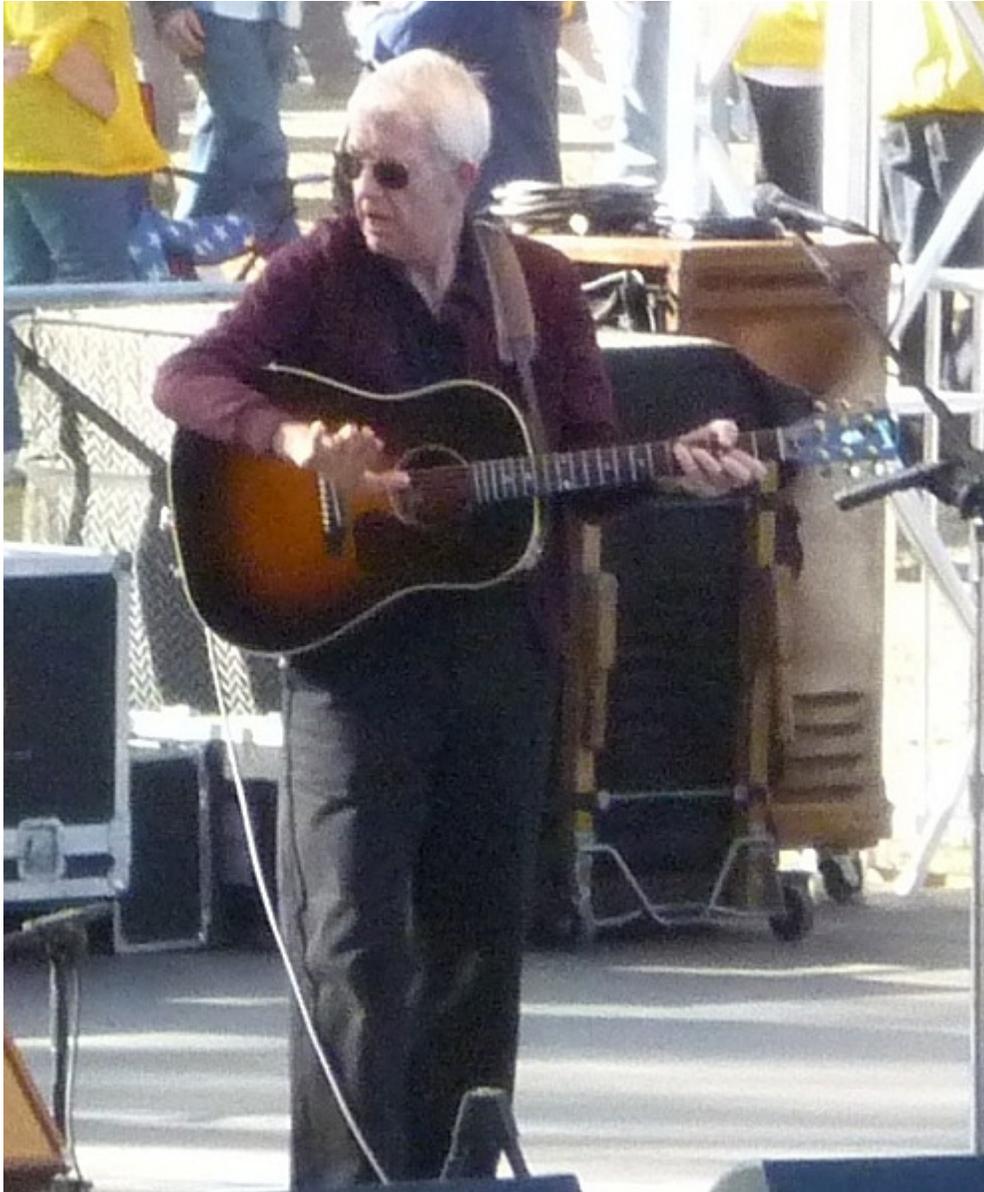
Lowie produced Elvis Costello's first five albums, including *My Aim Is True*, *This Year's Model*, and *Armed Forces*. He also produced The Damned's first single, "New Rose", considered the first English punk single, as well as the group's debut album, *Damned Damned Damned*.

He and Dave Edmunds formed a duo group, calling themselves Rockpile, which unfortunately ran into classic label restriction problems that eventually put the kibosh on the project. Their best known song, attributed to Lowe, is probably "I Knew the Bride (When She Used to Rock 'n' Roll).

Rock critic Jim Farber has observed: "Lowe's recent albums, epitomized by the new *At My Age*, moved him out of the realms of ironic pop and animated rock and into the role of a worldly balladeer, specializing in grave vocals and graceful tunes. Lowe's four most recent solo albums mine the wealth of American roots music, drawing on vintage country, soul and R&B to create an elegant mix of his own."

Indeed Lowe has stated that he never wants "to become one of those thinning-haired, jowly old geezers who still does the same shtick they did when they were young, slim and beautiful," he said. "That's revolting and rather tragic."

Saturday it was the worldly balladeer we all heard, strumming an acoustic guitar entirely solo while caressing the vocals with his smooth and practiced soprano voice. Unfortunately for Lowe, the annual tradition of a major technical snafu at HSBF fell on his shoulders, and, as pursuant to tradition, the "Headmaster of Rock" smoothly shrugged off the problems with amp feedback and blowing grit on the Star Stage to prove this performer stands above the rest.



When the tech crew realized that Lowe's instrument was using a bad cable they orchestrated a balletic maneuver in which the cable was swapped out in mid-song as Lowe did "Oh Heart, don't do it to me."

When the cable popped out, Lowe simple raised his arms while singing the title refrain, and then returned to strumming once the new cable was inserted without a single hitch in his voice, earning some well-deserved applause.

Another high point was his gorgeous version of “What’s So Funny ‘Bout Peace, Love and Understanding?”

GILLIAN WELCH

Gillian Welch is best known for her song "I'll Fly Away" on the Grammy-winning soundtrack of the Coen Brothers hit film *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Welch also had a cameo in the film, as a woman in a record store trying to obtain a copy of the Soggy Bottom Boys' recording of "Man of Constant Sorrow".

It was in Boston, while attending the Berklee School of music she met and began dating David Rawlings, who would become her long-time musical partner. In 1992, they moved to Nashville and began building a career. Her 1996 album, *Revival*, was nominated for a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album. She and Rawlings toured with Emmylou Harris, Patty Griffin, and Buddy Miller in 2004 as *The Sweet Harmony Traveling Revue*. The duo is fond of making surprise appearances at concerts throughout the American South.



Saturday, Welch performed with significantly greater pizzazz than in the last HSBF, where she and Rawlings sounded overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people. This time they both rose to and above the occasion as the wind continued to increase in strength, blowing back Gillian's summer dress and hair with borderline gale force. At one point, the performer stated, "I see they have taped down the microphone here. Heck, they should have taped ME down instead!"

Welch played guitar, banjo, and harmonica while belting out songs with energy that was nine times above what we had heard her do before while Rawlings threw himself into the playing with zest. As customary at HSBF, the duo were joined by other performers, including The Old Crow Medicine Show. Emmylou Harris made a surprise appearance with her and Rawlings to hold a

lyrics sheet and sing a beautiful version of “Didn’t Leave Nobody But The Baby” (from the O Brother Where Art Thou soundtrack).



The highlight of the set had to be the duo singing The Band's "The Weight" with the Old Crow Medicine Show. We got a video of most of that but its too big to upload. If folks want to hear a track from that set they can go to [Heather Browne's blog](#)

As it had already been quite a long day from nine in the morning until six, and the ferocious wind was chilling our bones we decided to miss Steve Earle.

For the 2nd Day of the Fest (actually 3rd, as Lyle Lovett had performed in the park Friday evening at what people said was a pleasant "potluck") we decided to stick to one stage, the Arrow Stage. This meant that we would miss Mavis Staples, Neko Case and Allen Toussaint.

Island-Lifer Helen, however, later reported that New Orleans native Allen Toussaint tore up the Gold Tower Stage with a cracking good set.

ROBYN HITCHCOCK

We did catch a piece of the quirky Robyn Hitchcock at the Rooster Stage however. The English-born Hitchcock, while primarily a vocalist and guitarist, also plays harmonica, piano and bass guitar. Hitchcock's lyrics are an essential component of his work and tend to include surrealism, comedic songs, characterisations of English eccentrics and melancholy depictions of everyday life. His themes include what many psychologists view as the roots of modern neurosis - namely, death, sex and eating. (Recognising this theme, he released an EP in 2007 called "Sex, Food, Death and Tarantulas".)

Hitchcock cites Pink Floyd's Syd Barrett as a major influence, besides Bob Dylan and John Lennon. He has collaborated on song material with Nick Lowe, former Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones, Peter Buck and Gillian Welch. In a filmed interview he stated, "At heart I'm a frightened angry person. That's probably why my stuff isn't totally insubstantial. I'm constantly, deep down inside, in a kind of rage."

He has also collaborated with director Jonathan Demme on several films, and appeared in Demme's remake of the Manchurian Candidate.



Personally, we thought he performed capable solid rock with his own signature twist. He is worth checking out again.

BOOKER T

Over at the Arrow Stage, we managed to catch American R&B icon, Booker T with the Drive By Truckers, a quirky pairing that actually worked out far better than one would think.

But toward the end, Booker walked up to the microphone and talked about being in Monterey 40 years ago with his friend Otis Redding. He then lit into "Sittin' On The Dock Of The Bay". The hush of the crowd gave way to a soft sing-

along, and finished with tens of thousands of people whistling along. Words don't do justice to a special moment like that.



The Southern Roots rock Drive By Truckers put in some very capable funk grooves, and it was clear every member of the man admired and idolized Booker T who has contributed songs to the American Canon that will last easily another 100 years.



RODNEY CROWELL

The Houston-born Rodney Crowell is considered to be part of both the alternative country and the mainstream country music camps. He is a contemporary of Steve Earle and, like Earle, was also influenced by the songwriting greats Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt. Crowell played guitar and sang for three years in Emmylou Harris' "Hot Band".

He was married to Rosanna Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash, from 1979 to 1992.

Saturday he played rockified Americana, which seems to be something of an increasingly larger genre these days. His songs tend to be more thoughtful about the state of America than your average Nashville tune, with one song based on his reading of the 4th century A.D. philosopher Epictetus. That one proved to delightfully danceable, as was most of his set.



While at moments his lyrics descend a bit into cultural masculine stereotypes of the truck-drivin' blue-collar man ("I don't eat no sushi") for the most part he trends to the intelligently poetic while retaining a firm sense of humor. In fact, critics have noted that his most recent Cd offering "Sex and Gasoline" is all about looking at the world from the woman's point of view. Or at least trying to, as in "The Rise and Fall of Intelligent Design", which begins, "If I could have just one

wish / Maybe for an hour/ I'd want to be a woman / And feel that phantom power".

AIMEE MANN

There remained a bit of dancing room for Crowell, but all that vanished as several thousand people pushed into the meadow to see and hear the alt-rock Aimee Mann perform songs from her Grammy-nominated albums. As soon as she came out on stage, prepared for the gales that blasted the place yesterday in a black leather jacket, she looked out over the sea of faces and exclaimed, "Holy shit! There're way more people here than I expected! This is awesome!"



We got this setlist from another blogger.

The Moth
Nightmare Girl
Momentum
Build That Wall
Par for the Course
Amateur
This is How It Goes
Wise Up
Save Me
You Could Make a Killing
Little Bombs

Thirty One Today Freeway

In vocal style she is reminiscent of Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders. Musically, she is straight alternative with that odd dissonance that comes from deliberately mismatching lyric content to orchestration in a way that says in every note, "things are not okay." Rolling Stone has called her "the Raymond Carver of pop: author of precisely observed tales in which broken characters arrive at quiet epiphanies."

Much of her music has to do with deep disappointment, either with people or with living circumstances, that is looked at with a cynical twisted smile. She amused fans by announcing certain songs from her CD "come from Smilers." The actual title is "Fucking Smilers."

Fortunately for everybody, the weather held to a coolish sunshine with none of the wind blast experienced yesterday and a lot of folks there were smiling with no irony intended at a very good set performed by a largely overlooked alternative artist.

TODD SNIDER

We didn't know what to expect from Todd Snider, as we knew nothing about him. That day, the boy from Beaverton, Oregon converted quite a few to solid fans with his wry stories, self-deprecating sense of humor and pretty solid musicianship.

He has been toying around in the top 100 charts since 1993, but the usual label problems have hindered him from full radio success.

Rolling Stone's Christian Hoard said Snider's "America's Favorite Pastime" is definitely the best song written about the no-hitter pitched by Doc Ellis of the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1970 while he was on acid.



Well, we don't know many songs about that one, but Snider definitely got a roar of approval when he sang that one from the Arrow Stage. This marks a return to the same stage on which he performed in 2006 to critical acclaim.

Retrocrush.com reported "I think it would benefit you to know that Snider has an insane mixture of Mitch Hedberg, Arlo Guthrie, Jerry Lee Lewis, John Prine, and the remaining percent is just...Todd Snider. He's certainly one of the more entertaining guys I've seen perform in a long time."

We would have to agree. It says something that his statement from the stage, "I am known to sometimes go on at length in a ramble for 18 minutes at time . . .". is no threat. His barefoot aw-shucks just another "tree huggin', peace lovin', pot smokin', barefootin' folk-singin' hippies like me" schtick may be a bit of a put on, but it sure is enjoyable and it works. Everybody loved him to pieces.

OTHERS

After two solid days of music and a chest cold coming on, we decided to forgo the Latin rock of Malo, headed up by Santana's brother as well as Little Feat, however Helen stayed on to report later that their version of the classic "Willin" was done with extraordinary delicacy. Since they were stacked on at the end, the band jammed a little past the official 8:00pm close time. Nobody there minded a bit.

Folks wanting to hear some samples can go go Strangerlist.com to hear MP3 selections. Most of these probably will not be up there long, so support the generous artists who come to play for free at this remarkable festival by buying their official music, their swag, and tickets to their shows.