

# HARDLY STRICTLY BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL

GOLDEN GATE PARK

OCTOBER 5 – 7, 2007



Mr. Hellman held his seventh Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival here in Golden Gate Park during the Fleet Week Celebrations downtown in what has become a sort of peace machine versus war machine sort of antagonism here. Every time the Blue Angels flew overhead in a clear deviation from standard flight path over the bay, thousands of middle fingers raised up to signal their collective disapproval. Take your war toys away and play somewhere else. This place is devoted to music, peace and beauty.

Traffic snafus and accidents in the Tube shunted our intrepid Correspondent from his main assignment to cover Chris Smither at the Porch Stage. From all accounts, Smither was a solid hit there, as none of the other stages hosted anyone of his stature at the time. Our man did arrive in time to catch the last half of James McMurtry at the always interesting Arrow Stage, a spot designated as the place where new stuff is happening, which in bluegrass and Country is not always a welcome assignment, trending more usually to knee-jerk tropes and received opinions -- witness what happened to the Dixie Chicks. McMurtry, however, is an unabashed freethinking rebel in the spirit of the Outlaw, an archetype which has a definite place within the Country/Americana genre.



McMurtry, although identified with the Austin, Texas music scene, was raised in Leesburg, Virginia before departing at a young age to live in Alaska and New Mexico before settling in Texas. His most recent work has been fairly political, featuring direct criticism of George W. Bush, a rare occurrence among the country-western/rockabilly circuit with which he is most identified.

Nevertheless, his most cogent and most interesting song offering with the greatest popularity has been the virulently working-class anthem "We Can't make it Here," with its direct criticism of GWB, the Iraq war and Wal-Mart.

His set proved to be energetic and pogo-jumping full of excitement, unleashing a major-sized can of whoop-ass on an enthusiastic crowd. His rendition of the Internet-released "We Can't Make It Here" brought forth enthusiastic cheers from the crowd even before its end.



The HSBG Festival is the brainchild of multimillionaire Warren Hellman who just likes to here good music. This is the seventh year he has held his fest in Golden Gate Park. The gathering has expanded from a single stage to over six stages and three days hosting the absolute best of anything having to do with Americana music today. Last year well over 250,000 people gathered for Phil Lesh and the Waybacks to close out Sunday on the last act. And, as usual and according to tradition, the maps supplied misplaced the main Star stage on the wrong side of John F.Kennedy Drive. Oh well.

We wandered over from the Arrow Stage to take in what we anticipated to be a rather minor stage with a talent known only to a few within a musical world. That turned out to be Alison Brown with Joe Craven on fiddle and mandolin and something over 50,000 folks had packed the vale there in front of the "Banjo Stage".

Among them, there in the crowd, in the middle of the crowd, in the middle of Golden Gate Park, in the middle of San Francisco, in the middle of California, but quite on the edge of the United States, were a couple oddfellows. Look at the expression on that woman's face and see what has her concerned there in the middle of a pleasant bluegrass festival.



Alison Brown is an odd duck among odd ducks in the world of folk/country music. A musical prodigy who began performing at age 11 with nationally renowned country musicians in SoCal, and who did a banjo gig at the Grand Ole Opry before finishing high school, she attended Harvard and UCLA, earning an MBA there. After a stint with the Smith Barney Financial Group, she quixotically assembled material for a solo debut followed by gigs with none other than Allison Krauss and then Michelle Shocked with any number of Grammy nominations just floating through the door like butterflies. Not content with accolades, she started pioneering the rare five-string banjo and recently released a CD of Django Rheinhardt-influenced tunes.



Clearly not a lady who is content to stand still for any two seconds, she has taken a humble instrument and elevated its use to very high levels usually equated with progressive jazz. Her performance on Saturday included her long time companion, Gary West, on bass but also featured a full sized Grand piano as well as Mr. Craven on fiddle and mandolin. As a nod to her bluegrass roots, she brought up Laurie Lewis (national fiddle champion) and Dale Ann Bradley to do a very traditional "Hummingbird", but her more interesting moments were jazzy renditions from her new Django-influenced catalog, including a "Mambo Banjo" which worked surprisingly well. She concluded with a jamming "Glasgow Return/I'M Naked" that would have brought the roof down had their been one. They did a really nice rendition of "Django Latino."



From the tail-end of Brown we caught the tail-end of the spirited Flatlanders set. The Flatlanders are a country band from Lubbock, Texas founded by Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and Butch Hancock.

Gilmore founded The Flatlanders in 1972; it has been performing on and off since then.



The band's first recording project, from the early 1970s, was barely distributed. It has since been acknowledged, through reputation and then Rounder's 1991 reissue *More a Legend Than a Band*, as a milestone of progressive, alternative country.

The three musicians continued to reunite for occasional Flatlanders performances. In 1998 they contributed to the soundtrack of *The Horse Whisperer*, and then in 2002 released their long-awaited follow-up album, *Now Again*, on New West Records. In 2004 this was followed with *Wheels of Fortune*, again on New West. Latterly, they have become associated with the New Country sound now collecting around Austin.



It was clear that the group had found its niche Saturday as many thousands had gathered around the Arrow Stage to hear these war-horses stomp out some serious boogie. One woman in the crowd practically swooned when Gilmore started singing, exclaiming, "He sounds just like Willie!"

Well, some similarities may be there, but the man had only one hole in his guitar and let it stand.

That said, the group had quite a dynamic presence and definitely exceeded expectations, pulling in a very large crowd from all sections of the park. They finished up with a humorous song about a hitchhiking, car-jacking Jesus Christ who forgives a man's sins when offered a beer.

After the very exciting Flatlanders, Michelle Shocked stepped on stage and proved what makes a SuperTalent stand head and shoulders above a mere Star. With the declining sun burning deep into the eyes of the band, with her rhythm section showing up fifteen minutes late after stage entry, with the sound

board and balance remaining so out of whack that Michelle was forced to wave her arms repeatedly to get the attention of an apparently stoned soundman, and at one point had to step to the back to distinctly scream "amp volume to the fucking channel!" she proved herself to be a consummate professional who has earned any number of Grammy nominations for very good reason.



The Wikipedia says Michelle Shocked (born Karen Michelle Johnston, 24 February 1962, in Dallas, Texas) is a U.S. singer-songwriter whose music and performances are influenced by her Texas roots, her political activism, and a self-

assured style that her first major label producer likened to troubadours such as Joni Mitchell, Spider John Koerner, and Dave Van Ronk.

She is the daughter of a carpenter and a woman who would end up committing her to a psychiatric hospital when she was 22 years old. She graduated from high school in Gilmer, Texas and received her bachelor's degree in the Oral Interpretation of Literature from the University of Texas in Austin. She was raised in a strict Mormon household and worked her way through college. A product of divorce she ran away from the home provided by her foster father -- a career military officer. Her mother has publicly stated that Michelle's birth was "a tragedy of premarital sexual relationships" and it is clear the mother-daughter relationship is quite strained.

Diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic when incarcerated by her mother in an institute in Dallas, she was subjected to repeated rounds of shock therapy.

Michelle's name dates back to the name she gave when arrested in 1984 at a protest called "The War Chest Tour" during the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, California. The demonstration challenged the practice of US corporations giving campaign contributions to both Democratic and Republican parties, benefiting from political favors regardless of which party is elected. "Michelle Shocked" was a play on words intended to resemble the phrase "shell shocked". The front cover of one of her best-known albums, *Short Sharp Shocked*, shows her restrained by the chokehold of a San Francisco policeman in a front page photograph published by the *San Francisco Examiner* the following day.

While living in Comiso, Italy, Michelle was raped and spent her recovery period in a separatist commune.



Hell, just that detail is enough to make you want to hug the gal and thank her just for survival, let alone coming out of that as a fiercely independent and vital artist adored by millions.

She generally is known as a quixotic leftist folkie. Her most popular song was the top 40 hit "Anchorage", but songs like 45 RPM Soul, Come a Long Way,

and Prodigal Daughter have provided the soundtrack to a fair number of feminist radicals for many years.

Saturday, she started off with a version of a Sister Rosetta Thorpe gospel tune with a bit of initial patter about how Thorpe was one of the first artists to employ an electric guitar. Rosetta Thorpe was a gospel R&B Superstar before the word had been coined. Insanely popular and transcending the boundaries of "race records" during the forties, her wedding was held in a football stadium so that thousands of adoring fans could attend.

As long minutes passed, during which her bassist failed to appear and the soundboard continued to throw every obstacle in her way, and people started to leave, the courageous and indomitable woman rose above it all and took the audience with her in what must be remembered as a definite Best of Festival Performance. The slightly built, angular framed woman turned the folkie "Anchorage" into a shouting pogo-jumping anthem, after stating "Well, this was not supposed to be on the setlist, but here goes anyway".

A bassist appeared from another band and Michelle immediately plugged in to tear into a rousing "Smokestack Lightning" that pulled people away from the Bruce Hornsby/Ricky Scaggs novelty playing over at the Banjo Stage, never letting up one second in a truly amazing electric performance. Never have we seen anything like it and seldom will people see anything like it again. This is one woman who put the spine and energy of punk rock back into Americana. By the end of her too short set, Ms. Shocked had turned what could have been a sure

dud into a stomping, hand waving, screaming success, doing material from her new CD as well as favorites from her old catalog.



And if anybody needs to know, one bass position remains open out there for a very fine and excellent and sure to succeed band led by one of the most exciting and dynamic performers gifted with a powerful voice in the business.

Much more on the subdued side, Gillian Welch has come up from relative obscurity into sudden limelight through her work on the soundtrack of "Oh Brother Wherefore Art Thou", in which she has a cameo appearance as "the woman on the train." She does old style bluegrass, but had a minor hit a while ago with the atypical "Flat Black Ford". She performs with her songwriting partner, David Rawlings, and Saturday proved there is a definite interest swelling up in America in the old musical styles.



Wonder why this pic is so distant and fuzzy? Heck, she is just a lil' sweet thang twangin' some purty gee-tar. Gillian Welch.



Below is a partial shot of some of the crowd. That part going up the hill there in Speedway Meadow extends to, and overflows the road.



Trying to find some way to get the whole business, we scrambled up into the trees and the steep hill on the south side where another several thousand people had clustered all the way up to the curb on Middle Drive.



Which kind of shows how a little thing can become such a success one might as well go hunt for the smaller draws, or peg out way far away from the madding crowd to get some peace. In fact, folks had spread blankets and set up picnics the entire length of Speedway Meadow to the polo fields.

We ambled on over to the Star Stage to catch the delayed start of a little band called Los Lobos, which is most definitely not just another band from East LA. In a self-deprecating moment, the lead singer thanked the crowd for "hanging around" to listen. Probably the best representative band that day of California's diversity, the group blends elements of blues, rockabilly, jazz and their own Mexican-American heritage. The clip included on [Island-life.net](http://Island-life.net) is of part of the extended intro to their popular "One Night in America".



You want to hear the rest of the song, you say? Buy a ticket, guys. Or pick up the CD. Its all good.



Seeking to escape the City before the end of the day for Fleet Week and the massive exodus of people from the crowded six stages all still cranking excellent music we cruised by Robert Earl Keen, also holding forth before a sizable crowd in his boots and ten-gallon Stetson, and took in the popular T Bone Burnett thumping the subtly political "Zombie Land", before snagging a bit of Steve Earle who started up with a long intro about how he came to sing one of Dylan's songs. The crowd before the Banjo stage had gotten even bigger by becoming denser with humanity.



T Bone Burnett came suddenly out of a 14 year recording hiatus with his collaboration on the "Oh Brother" soundtrack and seems to have caught the wave of sentiment for quirky Americana music, while Steve Earle has a new CD out which focusses on the New York Greenwich Village folk scene of the early sixties.



The trouble with the HSBG Festival is that the scope and range and extent of talent offered is so vast, it is hard to choose what to see and hear, as one must necessarily leave something out. Even missing Chris Smither, the day was a great one and a fine time was had by all.



On the way out we caught a bit of Steve Earle as he went into a longish speil about the first time he heard a particular Bob Dylan song.



Not to forget the barrooms and streetcorners where these Superstars began, a string of pearls decorated JFK Drive on the way out in the form of newbies. So, in commemoration of the Great Unknown, here is Moeprovencher (Moeprovencher.com) come down from Seattle just for the Fest.



Yes, we donated the "wicked dollar". Because we support live music, and that is because live music cures all sorts of social ills including penury, chilblains, venereal diseases, meanness, sickly constitutions, rampant conservatism, nervous jumping up and down, and, in addition, it bolsters the economy, refreshes the body politic, stimulates discourse on major subjects of the day, promotes decent moral values with only a few exceptions, revivifies the soul as it eases anguish, and, besides, it is good for you, too.

POSTSCRIPT: PBS did a special on this year's Festival, with estimates in attendance of some 500,000 folks.

