

# **HARDLY STRICTLY BLUEGRASS SPEEDWAY MEADOWS**

**OCTOBER 4, 2008**

Various Island-Lifers trundled over to Babylon for the 8th Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival. Friday evening was notable for the odd couple of Robert Plant paired with Alison Krauss before the skies let loose later that night with a real dockwalloper. The lineup featured surprise drop-in MC Hammer, who apparently blew the doors off with his set.

This is the eighth year of the massive free festival which is funded entirely by billionaire Warren Hellman. According to the *SF Comical*, "Hellman ... announced on the KFOG Morning Show, broadcasting live from the festival site Friday morning, that he has talked it over with his children (and heirs) and has endowed the festival with enough money to continue at least 15 years after his death ("after I croak" were his exact words).

There is certainly nothing to compare with his clambake anywhere else in the music world. After eight years, word of this festival has spread. Musicians from all over the world love to play the wacky event. Elvis Costello, who appears today, and his longtime associate Nick Lowe were chatting about the festival backstage Saturday at the Rooster Stage in leafy Marx Meadow just before Lowe's set.

Local fans have become regulars, settling on their favored places, keeping parking secrets close to the vest, and practicing all kinds of rituals and routines. A large number of people arrive before the morning fog burns off to lay down blankets, claiming prized real estate long before the crowds come. People compare past performances by the Hardly Strictly cast, which tends to feature many returning acts, like sports fans talking about previous seasons."

Hellman is no wallflower appreciator of music, as he is an accomplished banjo player himself. He and his band, The Wronglers performed Saturday on the tiny Porch Stage, although they were not listed on the formal program. The Dry Branch Fire Squad dragged him on stage for a guest appearance with instrument early Saturday.



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Saturday, our roving reporter, Helen, took in Odetta and Steve Earle under roiling but otherwise dry skies. Estimated crowd was a smallish -- for HSBF -- some 40,000.

The Wikipedia reports this about Odetta.

"Odetta (born December 31, 1930) is an African-American singer, actress, guitarist, songwriter, and a human rights activist, often referred to as "The Voice of the Civil Rights Movement." Her musical repertoire consists largely of American folk music, blues, jazz, and spirituals. An important figure in the American folk music revival of the 1950s and '60s, she was a formative influence on dozens of artists, including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Janis Joplin."



She apparently captivated the crowd with her classically trained voice (opera) and her extraordinary stage presence. Steve Earle & The Bluegrass Dukes ended the day with a great rendition of the 10-year old Steve Earle & The Del McCoury Band collaboration "The Mountain" as well as bluegrass versions of Earle originals "An American Boy" and the show closer "Cottonhead Road."

For Sunday, those lucky souls able to squeeze past the football stadium crowd and the Bridge to Bridge run joined something on the order of an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 music lovers.

Because of the compression this time we could only visit two of the stages. Helen did manage to see Googol Bordello, kings of "gypsy punk" and Iris Dement, the gal with the voice that seems to come from a Nashville of some two centuries ago.

Other reporters snagged Hazel Dickens, one of the few surviving crowd that remembers young upstart Johnny Cash overturning the Grand Ole Opry apple cart style. Dickens unfortunately is noticeably losing her voice. Ralph Stanley, a middling old timer of his own, remained in fine form, joined by the Clinch Mountain Boys, a collection of youngsters from the "iPod generation", as he called it, just now rediscovering genuine bluegrass.



Earl Scruggs, last survivor of the original Flatt and Scruggs band, was savvy enough to gather an eight piece band around him, and those fellows kept things lively.

Arrived in time to snag the multitalented Alison Brown do amazing things with her banjo. Alison does not do bluegrass so much as an unusual form of jazz, pushing her banjo instrument in directions never before traveled while still retaining a folksy attitude. Here she accompanies her "Road manager" who is singing "There's no Business like Show Business".



She and her band closed out with a rousing Celtic medley that had scads of folks rushing to the media booth to purchase her latest CD.



Over at the Rooster Stage we managed to secure a spot among the redwoods just up from the fence as the folks poured in, first to hear Greg Brown, who delivered a calm but impressive set from his chair, singing with a voice that reached down into the bass register. In fact, when Brown retunes his guitar to open "Spanish tuning", he simply keeps on singing in the same register where other folks find a need to choke up the neck with a capo just to compensate for the E dropped to D. He opened up with a wailing blues that really worked well with his baritone.



Brown does not write songs so much as compose poems that he sets to music. Often this high road can lead to awful pretension in some people, and jarringly precious lines or overly obscure references, but there is little of that in what he does well as he tends to keep fairly down-to-earth in his lyrics and his patter is full of warm humor. Just before his song about the whippoorwill songbird he commented, "That sound can be really romantic when heard from far away in the misty distance, but when you hear it up close you just think, 'that bird is crazy.' My grandpa would throw a boot at it . . .".

He also is pretty aware that the grandest poetry never has changed a bit of things in the world. His song "The Poet Game" drew applause when he sang

"I watched my country turn into a coast-to-coast strip  
mall  
and I cried out in a song:  
if we could do all that in thirty years,  
then please tell me you all -  
why does good change take so long?"

But then he ends with

"Sirens wail above the fields - another soul gone  
down  
- another Sun about to rise.  
I've lost track of my mistakes,  
like birds they fly around and darken half of my skies.  
To all of those I've hurt - I pray you'll forgive me.  
I to you will freely do the same.  
so many things I didn't see, with my eyes turned  
inside,  
playing the poet game.

I walk out at night to take a leak underneath the stars  
-  
oh yeah that's the life for me.  
There's Orion and the Pleiades and I guess that must  
be Mars -  
all as clear as we long to be.  
I've sung what I was given -  
some was bad and some was good.  
I never did know from where it came  
and if I had it all to do again  
I am not sure I would play the poet game."

At the end of his set, he simply thanked the audience for being there and laid down his guitar next to the chair and walked off. The MC commented "I think we can all agree Greg Brown is a national treasure."

Treasure that he is, the stage area filled up with people clear around the bend to the road, while the slopes to either side started taking on people by the drips, then by the hundreds, then by the thousands until there was no more

space to be had and they still kept on arriving until the crowd overflowed the paths on either side of the trees and the areas behind the stage.

All to hear and see Iron and Wine, which is the brainchild of Jim Beam, who launched into a heart-ripping rendition of "Trapeze Swinger" with its aching repetition of "please, remember me".



Beam was profiled in Paste Magazine after acquiring an underground buzz and seems to have collected an enormous fan base of which he only became aware that Sunday. When he saw the physical size of the crowd, which continued to grow through his set despite his flubbing a couple of songs he had written himself, he turned about and looked in a circle with amazement at all the people. "Man you guys sure know how to party. I sure wish my town had a rich man to throw a party like this."

The extent he was unaware of his popularity came out when he said, "Well now I am going to play a new song. Well, I guess all my songs are new to you anyway."

Beam does tend to alter his songs spontaneously as he performs, which can make it difficult to remember your own lyrics. His "Boy with a Coin" easily stretched out three times longer than the original and included another song's worth of verses before the main verses even began, which seems to indicate that he regards songwriting as a process of continuous development.

His "Naked As We Came", however, is so tightly written and perfect that he pretty much kept to the radio version. The sentiment expressed should be familiar to those fans of Death Cab for Cutie.

#### "Naked As We Came"

She says "wake up, it's no use pretending"  
I'll keep stealing, breathing her.  
Birds are leaving over autumn's ending  
One of us will die inside these arms  
Eyes wide open, naked as we came  
One will spread our ashes 'round the yard

She says "If I leave before you, darling  
Don't you waste me in the ground"  
I lay smiling like our sleeping children  
One of us will die inside these arms  
Eyes wide open, naked as we came  
One will spread our ashes round the yard

Mortality is never far from Beam's lyrics, always hovering there in the background as a reminder of itself and as a presence that must be dealt with and included in all things. Although deeply spiritual, he finds little solace in Religion.

Papa died smiling  
Wide as the ring of a bell  
Gone all star white  
Small as a wish in a well  
And Sodom, South Georgia  
Woke like a tree full of bees  
Buried in Christmas  
Bows and a blanket of weeds

Papa died Sunday and I understood  
All dead white boys say, "God is good"  
White tongues hang out, "God is good"  
(from Sodom, South Georgia)

We think Iron and Wine is one to watch, especially as Beam starts to work with other performers.

Along the way to hook up with friends we passed by Pegi Young crunching solid rock from the Arrow stage, but the crowd was too thick to get a view.

From the packed Rooster stage we wandered back to the Banjo Stage, there to catch classical bluegrass Ricky Scaggs tear it up before Emmylou Harris returned for her eighth festival closeout show. Warren Hellman was present and clearly was having the time of his life up there with Scaggs and his Kentucky Thunder.

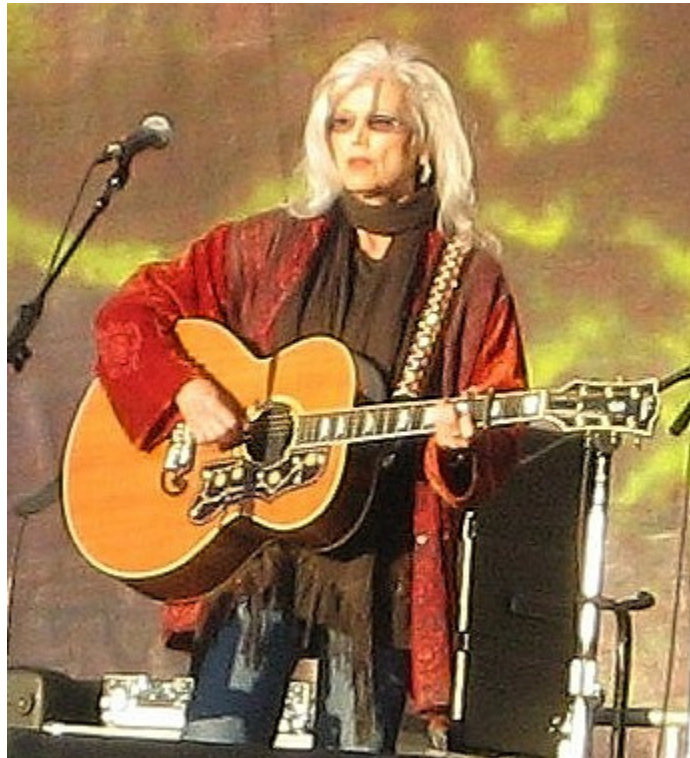




Warren Hellman stepped up to MC for the closer, Emmylou Harris, and thank all the people involved, including Security. "Where else in the world can you see even the Security folks busting up in dance right there in front, I tell you!"



Harris launched into her beautiful "Here I am" looking as if she had not aged a bit since her 1970 debut album. Certainly her voice remains powerful and affecting, and the crowd that came to adore here stretched the length of the Speedway Meadow and swelled out to both sides into the woods and the road.



Click on the image to get a panned video of this amazing crowd.



With Harris's piercingly sweet and beautiful voice filling the woods and the fog rolling in over a very music happy crowd we wandered out, passing several locals taking advantage to setup there own mini stages, including this enterprising fellow who, perhaps, hasn't heard the last word on "The Poetry Game."



Or maybe he has. How much for a villanelle, dude?