

Fiddlers' Campground Impressions

Weiser, Idaho - June 20, 1996

by Alan Harris

WALK WITH ME through this 10-acre campground which is temporarily home to country musicians from all over America. Listen to the various string-and-wood instruments snickering across the breeze. They're being played in jam sessions by little circles of the laidest-back musicians you may ever see, warming the heart cockles of roving listeners. These jamming musicians gather just about anywhere--between motor homes, under plastic awnings, around stumps, or wherever else they durn please. Their motto seems to be: "Play it, and they will come." And people come.

Go ahead and let these sounds haunt you--the mellow whine of three men's high voices in close harmony, the lackety-splattering of the banjo, the cock-a-doodle-doo of the show-off fiddle, the cackling of the mandolin, the rich rummaging of guitars, the elephant walk of a booming string bass, and the occasional sassy yammering of a harmonica. When our musicians end their song with a diddle and a strum, feel free to clap, for light applause is their only pay around here where the music is free and the going is easy.

The annual National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest in Weiser, Idaho (pronounced "Weezer") brings together hundreds of country music enthusiasts for pickin', fiddlin', grinnin', singin', drinkin', and deep thinkin'. Newly met strangers, once they begin playing music, behave like lifelong friends before they've reached the first chorus of a familiar tune. What makes them friends (besides friendliness) is their love for these chord changes, lyrics, and melodies, plus the ad-lib tinkles and plunks they are able to weave into the sonic tapestry.

Let's wander some more around these grounds where Weiser's agricultural institute once thrived. My watch reads 10 p.m., but the solstice twilight is lingering stubbornly here on the western edge of Mountain Time Zone. Above your left shoulder notice the scythe-like new moon skimming down over Oregon across the Snake River. As we walk, look down and notice all the personal belongings that are lying around, held safe enough by the honor system that fiddling brings to town.

Here beside this next tree we come upon another fiddling session. Listen carefully for a minute. Do you feel the past in your chest? The present in your head? The future in your feet, itching to dance? This is music as real as it gets, flowing right here in front of you, into you, through you.

These sounds won't last long here in the Weiser twilight, and our memory of this evening will fade, though perhaps you have been permanently touched by some lively refrain. Fiddling music seems to sound best when not confined too much, and how much freer could it have been than in tonight's open air?

It's getting dark. The jam sessions are breaking up. Musicians and listeners are heading back to their campers and tents. Best we go home now with fresh hummings in our heads.