



Bluegrass Utopia

A WEEK OF HEAVEN FOR MUSICIANS

By Gigi Ragland

Grunge musicians stake their claim in Seattle. Blues fans look to Memphis. For jazz, it's New Orleans. But to local aficionados of bluegrass, one of America's oldest and most original music forms, the place is Lyons and the time is now.

Summertime is when bluegrass musicians from around the country descend on the town of Lyons—population about 1,800—for the RockyGrass Academy and festival, a unique combination of school and musical celebration. Here, devotees of the bluegrass sound learn about everything from the old-time stylings of its founding father, Bill Monroe, to the progressive “newgrass” influences of mandolin virtuoso Sam Bush.

RockyGrass Academy began in Telluride in 1988 and celebrates its 14th year in Lyons this summer. It's a school, with offerings for novices and experts alike in the art of playing traditional bluegrass instruments: guitar, mandolin, banjo, fiddle, bass and dobro. Registration for the four-day program is open to adults through an online lottery that happens in the fall.

“We decided to go with a lottery process because the demand for these spaces became so overwhelming,” explains Brian Eyster, marketing director for Planet Bluegrass, which sponsors major Colorado bluegrass events and is headquartered in Lyons. The good news is that approximately 80 percent of 260 applicants are accepted into the acad-

emy, and that class sizes are small—about 10 to 12 students. A concurrent Kids' Academy is open to children whose parents have been accepted. This allows families to share the experience, turning it into a summer vacation with camping, playing in the nearby river and practicing music with fellow bluegrass lovers.

Planet Bluegrass Ranch is not far from downtown Main Street. It's set back from U.S. 36, neatly tucked into a vermilion canyonland with the St. Vrain River running through it. The rustic natural setting provides an inspiring stage for the RockyGrass Academy July 20-24, and then for the RockyGrass bluegrass festival that follows July 25-27.

Music on the Green

From start to finish, the academy and festival provide a 24/7 immersion in bluegrass music. Daytime classes are taught in large mesh tents that dot the green grass. At any time during the week, student musicians can be heard tuning their instruments or practicing solos by the sandy shore of the St. Vrain or under the shady refuge of big cottonwood trees. Small, impromptu jams usually form in the afternoons and evenings, often lasting into the wee hours of the morning. Seeing it during academy week, it's hard to believe that the tranquil setting will soon be swarmed by 3,500 excited blue-



grass fans a day during RockyGrass, all staking out spots on the lawn. Famous bluegrass bands like the Infamous Stringdusters and the Sam Bush Band will perform on the same stage that a few student jam bands occupied the previous week.

Mellowness and excitement go hand in hand in the RockyGrass experience. "RockyGrass is an important part of bluegrass in Boulder because it is such an all-star attraction for the music," says Michael Boyd, who works as COO of a Boulder manufacturing company and is attending his second academy

Musicians stay busy at RockyGrass Academy. From left: bass class; Grammy-winner Sally Van Meter (white shirt) leading a lap dobro class; Del McCoury Band members Jason Carter and Del McCoury sharing a laugh; instrument building; Kids' Academy fiddler Lauren Boyd.

and festival this year. "Local venues support the music, so there is a lot of opportunity for fans to see music, but also for bands new and old to get stage time and exposure." All in all, it's a boon for bluegrass musicians, "whether it is in private jams with other friends who play, or in open jams at local establishments, or in any of the many festival 'parking lot picks' that are the highlight of the bluegrass experience."

The academy's lineup of instructors includes some of the best bluegrass musicians and performers in the world. Students thrill to be in the presence of some of their bluegrass idols and to learn new techniques, including secret "licks" or chord progressions they can add to their musical repertoires. Among this summer's teachers is world-class banjo great Pete Wernick, who's also known as Dr. Banjo. Wernick enjoys sharing his knowledge with students. "Teaching is quite different from performing, where the idea is to show 'Look how good you can be, and here's how to do it.' When performers are good, they receive tribute; when teachers are good, they are giving tribute"—to the teachers who inspired them in the past, and to the talents of a new generation.

Wernick says that when he was learning bluegrass, he fantasized about spending a day with other musicians learning songs and playing together. "If someone had told me about the RockyGrass Academy, it would have sounded too good to be true." ♦

For more information on RockyGrass Academy, go to www.bluegrass.com.

Gigi Ragland is a freelance journalist who enjoys bluegrass music. She's signed up for her second year at RockyGrass Academy.

Sara Watkins of the band Nickel Creek leads the graduation procession out of the St. Vrain River on the final day of the RockyGrass Academy. She was christening a newly built mandolin from the instrument-building class.



TOP LEFT AND TOP MIDDLE PHOTO BY RUSSELL BRAMLETT; TOP RIGHT PHOTO COURTESY KIM BOYD; BACKGROUND BY LUYIWANOVIA METALIA