



Adherents of sustainable festivation

PLANET BLUEGRASS

The Bluegrass is Always Greener

Planet Bluegrass plans to make its festivals easier on the planet by implementing a doctrine of “sustainable festivation.”

■ BY GIGI RAGLAND

Ah festival season in Colorado. The distinctive finger-picking, strumming and bowing sounds of rootsy, innovative Bluegrass music not only fills the air but also the campgrounds and stages of outdoor venues across the state. But that's not all that has had a fill-up, so to speak. After all the fun is finished and the campers, festivarians and artists have gone home, the host spot or town is stuck with the big job of tidying up. Shouldn't festivals, with their hippy, love-your-Earth-Mother be leading the dive when it comes to sustainability? Absolutely. And Planet Bluegrass—which produces the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, Rockygrass Academy and Festival, Folk Festival, Song School and the Wildflower Pavilion Concert Series—is leading the charge.

Planet Bluegrass' home base is tucked into the red rock canyons in the town of Lyons, site of all of its productions except Telluride. The natural beauty of the grounds are amplified by the hum of the St. Vrain River flowing through it. It's an inspiration both to the festival attendees and to Planet Bluegrass' day-to-day staff who works on the grounds—and they aim to keep it as pristine as possible.

That's a tough task when so many people show up to enjoy the sublime pleasures of nature alongside amplified music. About 10,000 aficionados attend the three-day Telluride concert, and Planet Bluegrass' other events each draw 3,500+ dancing and hula-hooping festivarians. But those numbers are actually smaller than other mega-festivals across the nation, making it easier for Planet Bluegrass to cultivate a doctrine of “sustainable festivation.”

Planet Bluegrass has committed to a sustainability doctrine, which is more like a thesis on the organization's dedication to the cause, and has posted its ambitious, comprehensive sustainability document online. The effort has been so impressive that in 2007, Governor Bill Ritter, Jr. declared June 23 “Colorado Bluegrass Day,” honoring Planet Bluegrass for “using renewable energy to help protect our environment while producing a world-class festival.” The honor reflects the organization's years of leading the way in sustainable festivation and the green festival movement in America.

“All our programs are voluntary, but we love it when festivarians help out,” says Brian Eyster, mar-

keting and communications manager for Planet Bluegrass. One such program offered at every festival this year will be the “How Green is your Grass” campsite challenge. The idea is to leave a minimal footprint on the planet and to encourage creative, sustainable campsites (essentially a “leave no trace” philosophy put into practice). The contest will provide an incentive to campers to reduce waste.

To participate in the contest, festiviarian campers must write down what they are doing to reduce, reuse and recycle at their campsites, take a few pictures and then post the results in the Festival Town area. Campers then vote on their favorite postings each day, which culminates into the voting of the grand prize-winning campsite at the end of the festival. The winner receives camping passes for the following year's festival. In the past, festivarians have used solar panels to power blenders, composted all kitchen materials and even used a small hydro-turbine to power a disco ball. One Telluride camper explained that “between the renewable energy use and the composting of corn-based utensils, I felt like last year's festival was not only music-tastic, but also eco-lightful.”

Planet Bluegrass not only provides compost containers at all campgrounds and festival areas, but it also offers locally filtered water at each venue. This is in an effort to limit the use of single-use bottles. Festivarians can bring their own reusable bottles from home or purchase one at the site and fill up for free. “Reuse” is the key word here. Although vendors use only compostable plates and utensils, Planet Bluegrass encourages folks to bring their own “reusable” silverware, napkins, plates, vintage beer cups (from previous festivals), water bottles, bags, tarps, etc. to the festival and to take them back home.

Planet Bluegrass has already made significant steps toward reducing waste at all its events. Since 2003, its goal has been to educate not only Planet Bluegrass staff but to share what they learn and to raise the bar on the art of sustainable festivation. For those who want to know more, the organization's website includes a new Sustainable Festivation Blog, where they will provide updates (SustainableFestivation.com) and festivarians can check out the forum that includes tips and ride-shares (Festiviarian.com). •

the hard way that open-toe sandals are not a good idea (picture a day's worth of beer foam caked on the toes). Still, these five-hour shifts hardly feel like work. Instead, it's a few hours spent socializing and listening to music bellow off the canyon walls.

We pour a few beers for the public then one for ourselves. Wait, you're thinking, they're breaking that no drinking rule. Well, there's a loophole. Because the rule forbids drinking under the beer tent, all we have to do is step out from under the tent and tip one back. Technically that's not *in* the booth. Not that it matters. One of my shift managers actually yells at me for not drinking enough and tells me to have more fun.

As if I need the push. By the time Saturday rolls around, I am the life of the booth (in my eyes anyway), ringing the tip bell every few minutes (all tips go to the nonprofit radio station) and finding creative ways to double the donations—and expedite my beer buzz.

When a willing participant arrives, I offer a simple challenge: Chug a beer quicker than me and it's on the house, but if the patron loses, the cost doubles. I'm not sure if there is a rule against this practice, but I'm just 23 and fresh out of four years of University of Colorado training. Needless to say, the donations double more often than not.

I spend hours off-shift being the typical Bluegrass festiviarian (although I think I only pay full price for three or four beers the entire festival), meet countless new friends and find some truly unique places to pee all while the best bluegrass in Colorado plays on the main stage.

To be honest, it's a minor miracle that I'm still standing by the time I finish my shift on Saturday. Better yet, I'm still making accurate change.

Fresh off the shift, I plow into the crowd, looking for friendly faces willing to share some of their prime space. It doesn't take long before I'm groovin' to Yonder Mountain String Band and Vince Gill with complete strangers and having the time of my life.

By the time the Sam Bush Band makes its way on stage to close out the festival on Sunday night, I've battled three epic hangovers, partied my way until 3 in the morning every night and developed a fan club. So what if it's just one-member deep? She's pretty darn cute. And—in the true spirit of the festival—she gives me her extra ticket to an after-hours concert at the historic Sheridan Opera House where we dance until well past last call.

This chance meeting sums up the types of people you run into at Bluegrass, whether you're working the Booth or not. Everyone from Boulder yuppies to dread-sporting, patchouli-stinking hippies to middle-aged bluegrass aficionados comes here to shed off those labels and just be a part of the experience. All you have to do is follow the unwritten rules. •

Jacob Haskins is the editor of Kickstand, a magazine devoted to cruiser bikes that will hit newsstands this June.

Do It: You can volunteer to work the beer booth, too. Contact WKOTO, koto.org