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TRADITIONAL MUSIC MEANS SUMMER FUN: STATESVILLE MAGAZINE GUIDE TO BLUEGRASS AND FIDDLERS' FESTIVALS

by Art Menius

Towards the end of November a little more than 250 years ago, a brief notice appeared in the Virginia Gazette, the leading, and usually only, newspaper in the Colony of Virginia. The piece informed readers that the St. Andrew's Day celebration in Hanover County, just north of present day Richmond, would include "a fine Ceremona Fiddle to be plaid for by any number of Country fiddlers."

As far as scholars can ascertain that was the first fiddlers' contest ever held in America. Little evidence remains for the next century and a half, but around 100 years ago they became quite common in the

southeast as Reconstruction and the New South movement brought a new way of life. During the 1960s bluegrass festivals joined, then swelled, the ranks of warm weather string band events. Now hundreds of thousands of people from Mocksville to Australia include the outdoors music and camaraderie of bluegrass festivals and fiddlers' conventions in their vacation plans.

Stage performances aren't the only drawing cards for these events. Many folks travel hundreds of miles just for the jam sessions in the campgrounds and parking lots. Others simply enjoy the easy going contact between the fans and the stars. Many thrive on the movable feasts of recreational vehicle and tent cities traveling from one festival to the next.

The Statesville area string band music summer is already well under way. Indoor fiddlers' conventions, such as the one in Mooresville, dot central North Carolina during March and April. The extraordinary Merle Watson Memorial Festival in Wilkesboro kicked off the major festivals at the end of April. Memorial Day weekend, of course, brought the legendary Fiddlers Grove contest, as well as the big Bass Mountain bluegrass festival near Burlington.

BEST BETS

The fiddlers' contest in Mount Airy on the first weekend in June has achieved a quiet notoriety due to the high quality and geographical diversity of its contestants and because seemingly everyone attending comes to play or hear music.

July's Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver Family Style Bluegrass Festival matches a reputation as the premier showcase for contemporary bluegrass in the South with exceptional parking lot picking. The festival, which drew more than 3,000 fans last summer, remains one of the few where big stars jam with the regular folk. As always the Denton lineup is stunning with such luminaries as the hosts, the Tony Rice Unit, Hot Rize, Red Knuckles & the Trailblazers, the Bluegrass Cardinals, and Jim & Jesse.

With the reconstitution of the Union Grove contest as Fiddlers' Grove, the venerable Galax Old Fiddlers Convention has assumed the mantle of the largest such gathering in the eastern half of the country. Visitors can expect thousands of people, hundreds of jam sessions, serious and comical contestants, and a helping of local and statewide Virginia politicians.

Over the past decade the bluegrass festivals at Bass Mountain Music Park, just south of Burlington, on Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends have largely replaced the hoary Camp Springs events in significance. This 1-3 September the Bass Mountain Boys will welcome Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, Raymond Fairchild & the Crowe Brothers, Curley Seckler & the Nashville Grass, and, on Sunday, the gospel sounds of the Dixie Melody Boys.

Readers of Statesville Magazine live in the heart of bluegrass and old-time music territory. With so many major festivals and contests added to concerts sponsored by such organizations as the Charlotte Folk Music Society and Winston-Salem's Fiddle & Bow Society, plus Black Mountain's McDibb's nightclub and the Poor Farmer's Farms in Meadows of Dan, VA, and a wealth of bluegrass on the radio in the area, it all computes to a glorious summer for lovers of traditional music.

A BLUEGRASS CALENDAR

2-3 June, Mount Airy, 15th Annual Bluegrass & Old Time Fiddlers' Convention; Veterans' Memorial Park; Jack Jones, 919-786-6830.

10 June, Charlotte, 8th Annual Charlotte Folk Music Festival; Latta Plantation Park; Joe Cline, 704-376-1887.

14-17 June, Cliffside, 15th Annual Snuffy Jenkins Old-Time & Bluegrass Music Festival; Snuffy Jenkins Music Park; Ben Humphries, 704-657-5411.

23-24 June, Elk Creek, VA, 22nd Annual Grayson County Old-Time & Blue Grass Fiddlers' Convention;

Elk Creek Ball Park; Pat Burns, 703-773-2811.

30 June-1 July, Stuart, VA, Dominion Bluegrass Festival; Dominion Valley Park; Cecil Hall, 703-694-7009.

30 June-2 July, Stuart, VA, Dixie Classic Bluegrass Festival; Wayside Park; Doug Stinson, 919-472-8159.

6-9 July, Denton, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver Family Style Bluegrass Festival; Threshers' Reunion Grounds (Fly-In); Milton Harkey, (704)274-5547.

28-29 July, Cana, VA, 3rd Annual Ralph Stanley Bluegrass Festival; Mountain Man's Music Park; 703-755-3871.

3-5 August, Asheville, 62nd Annual Mountain Dance & Folk Festival; Asheville Civic Center; Jackie Ward, 800-548-1300.

9-12 August, Galax, VA, 54th Annual Old Fiddlers Convention; Felts Park; Oscar Hall, 703-236-6355.

18-19 August, Axton, VA, 1st Annual Bluegrass Festival, Dogwood Entertainment Park; Rt. 3, Box 74-A; Axton, VA 24054.

1-3 September, Burlington, Labor Day Weekend Bluegrass Festival; Bass Mountain Music Park; John Maness, (919)228-7344.

15-17 September, Madison, 6th Annual Bobby Atkins & the Countrymen Festival; Hogan Creek Music Park; Jolene Caudill, 919-274-3301.

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