

# THE DOYLE LAWSON & QUICKSILVER FESTIVAL:

Good Bluegrass Is What It's  
All About

by Arthur Menius



John Palma

The air hung muggy and sweat-filled that Saturday night last July in Denton, North Carolina. Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver played even hotter. Their hallmark qualities—flawless instrumental work and complex vocal harmonies—somehow went into overdrive. The four musicians seemed to give more than their all, and the audience went wild. They would have begged for encores all night.

They expected, of course, great things from the group. This was the third annual Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver Family Style Bluegrass Festival. Joining Quicksilver and 8000 fans at the Denton Fly-In Grounds, about forty miles south of Greensboro, was a stellar line-up including Hot Rize, the Country Gentlemen, the Dry Branch Fire Squad, and the Johnson Mountain Boys.

The festival is a family reunion at which several thousand members appear. Old friendships are renewed and new acquaintances begun. Membership in the family requires only love for the music and respect for the rules and spirit of the event.

That atmosphere matters most to Milton Harkey, a guitar picker from Asheville, North Carolina, who occasionally finds time to work as sales manager of a wholesale drug firm. Fearing that many festivals were getting out of hand, he searched hard for a site where he thought people would be serious about a family style event. Harkey finally selected the Fly-In Grounds in the beautiful rolling hills called the Uwharrie Mountains. He strictly enforces the rules forbidding the display of alcoholic beverages at the festival. His patrons cooperate; last year he didn't have to ask a single person to

leave. Harkey notes that he has "yet to see any personal problems at Denton. We don't have and we don't want it.

"There's a different kind of peer pressure at Denton," Harkey says. "Everybody helping everybody else makes a good bluegrass festival. A lot of people, even strangers, have helped us out of their own volition, because of the music and because of family style."

The physical surroundings at the Fly-In Grounds, centrally located among the cities of Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem, enhance the feeling of security and com-



Sandi Crisco

munity. Tall hardwoods cover the camping area with a cool shade. Even at midday, only a trickle of sunlight cascades through the leaves. Carefully maintained grass makes a soft carpet spreading uphill from the covered stage and seating area, which can hold about 2000 fans. A wing to the left of the stage serves as a kitchen supplying tons of food, while the right wing is a staging room where the band members can relax in private before and after their performances. The ancient wooded hills provide an atmosphere of stability and tradition.

Harkey spent three years preparing

himself to direct this festival. He helped others and organized indoor shows while learning the intricacies of promotion and publicity. He relies on magazine advertisements, posters, flyers, and direct mailing.

In addition to his devotion to the family style, Harkey had grown frustrated with the festivals that had "two great bands and eight bad ones. Another reason I got into promoting was because I heard what I thought was bad music at many festivals," Harkey says. "Not necessarily the bands, but the style and selection didn't appeal to me. I wanted to reduce poor songs to a minimum. I like to keep the bands sharp. If you get an encore at Denton, you've done a good job."

Late in 1980, Harkey met a band leader who wanted to host a family style festival. "Milton approached me," Doyle Lawson recalls, "and I knew he was sincere, dedicated, and hardworking—the kind of person I like to be associated with." They quickly agreed on guidelines for the 1981 inaugural. These included making sure that everyone can have a good time within reason, that parents don't have to worry about their children, and that they hire the best talent and sound systems available.

Lawson takes deep personal satisfaction in the success of the festival. He helps assure this by viewing his role as an active and serious one. "I stay concerned with the sound and what's happening on stage. I like to meet the people and to remain as visible as possible in order to serve as a middleman between the promoter, the fans, and the bands." Harkey points out that Lawson has always done more than his contract had specified.

A turnout of 3000 people for the 1981 festival featuring Quicksilver, the Bluegrass Cardinals, and the Seldom Scene encouraged Harkey. He considers the second year, which included J.D. Crowe and the New South, the Bluegrass Cardinals, and the first public performance of the Bluegrass Album Band, to be the turning point. He believes the 1982 attendance of 6000 fans showed that many came for the festival itself rather than any particular artist.

Harkey's emphasis on the second level bands forms a hallmark of his promotional style. Even for the less desirable time slots, he hires only bands he considers better than average. Last year new-comers Summer Wages of Mt. Airy, North Carolina, and the Virginia Squires from Norfolk, Virginia, received big ovations at Denton. "When people come to Denton for a bluegrass festival," Harkey assures, "it's [for] good bluegrass, not something else."

That policy received thunderous confirmation in 1983. Hot Rize earned overwhelming applause for a set in which both Red Knuckles' western swing and Pete Wernick's phase-shifter were forbidden.

The true measure of success for Harkey, however, comes from the number of parking lot pickers. He was proud to count 26 such groups playing at one time during the 1982 event.

The 1984 Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver Family Style Bluegrass Festival will take place on the weekend of July 6 through 8. Joining Quicksilver as headliners will be the Bluegrass Cardinals and the Seldom Scene. Harkey tentatively plans ("about 80% certain") to include Thursday night activities for the first time. These would consist of band and instrument workshops and a performance by the Johnson Mountain Boys.

Harkey says, "This is Denton—excellent music, family style, and good picking in the parking lot is what it's about."



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