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The Aiken Bluegrass Festival 5.10 & 5.11.19

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Western Carolina State Fairgrounds

Aiken, SC

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Friday, May 10, 2019:

This past weekend, *The Aiken Bluegrass Festival (ABF)* returned to the Western Carolina State Fairgrounds in the Augusta suburb of Aiken, South Carolina. While advertised as a bluegrass festival, the lineup was far more diverse than it has been in years past. Don't get me wrong, there was plenty of bluegrass music on the bill, but the lineup was far more eclectic than your average "bluegrass" festival. The crowd that showed up this year for ABF's 15th installment was much smaller in comparison to last year when Greensky Bluegrass was on hand as the headliners. The smaller size, however, didn't make it any less fun for those of us that made our yearly pilgrimage to what has become one of the best music festivals in the southeast.



One addition to this year's festival was a third night of music for the folks that purchased early entry passes. I was personally not there but all reports are that Mimi Naja, and defacto master of ceremonies Benny Galloway with his friend singer/songwriter Donna Hopkins both played enjoyable sets for the lucky few that were already on site. The bulk of the festival goers showed up and scrambled for camping spots early Friday morning and, by the time the musical portion of the day started at 3:00 pm, the campgrounds were filling up with people aching to get their musical fix.

The first set of the day came from local Augusta band Doug and the Henrys on the new and improved Campfire Stage. Last year the Campfire Stage was just a covered picnic table area, but this year it had been upgraded to an actual stage complete with tie dyed backdrops and a state-of-the-art sound system. Vocalist and guitarist, Doug Johnson, commented from stage that he and his band had been at Aiken "since the beginning." I don't know if that means they've played all 15 years, but I know for sure they've at least been at each ABF I've attended. The band, which is anchored by father and son duo Henry Wynn Jr. and Henry Wynn III ran through an hour-long set consisting of popular cover songs like "Don't Think Twice," "Hey Good Lookin'" and even a choice version of Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried" in an obvious nod to the quickly approaching Mother's Day holiday. For the most part the thirty or forty people that had wandered over for this set were relaxing in camp chairs or on the stumps of wood that acted as campfire stools readying themselves for a long day of music. There were, however, a few times that the band played in such a manner that the audience was unable to resist the urge to get up and boogie a bit, most notably during "Orange Blossom Special" and "Foggy Mountain Breakdown." As their set ended the stage announcer gleefully exclaimed, "Aiken has officially started," and those of us that had gathered for this set made our

way to the inside stage known as Steve's Hall for a set from the Montana bred jam-grass band The Kitchen Dwellers.

The Kitchen Dwellers have been making a name for themselves with their intense style of faster than lightning picking. I have been hearing great things about these guys for a while now, but this was my first time seeing them do their thing. While it is not necessarily the brand of bluegrass that I prefer I can see why they are making waves on the live music scene. They do indeed jam. Hard. Each band member took a turn leading the others on a musical journey. The highlights of their performance included a cover of The Band's "Don't Do It," which had everyone in the crowd joyously dancing around the hall, and The Kitchen Dwellers original known as "Visions Of Mohr." Apparently, the studio version of "Visions Of Mohr" was recorded with Mihali of Twiddle fame and Friday's version sounded exactly how you'd think a bluegrass song with the dude from Twiddle would sound. With plenty of banjo and guitar effects, it got about as intense as a jam-grass song could while stretching nearly fifteen minutes in its set closing slot.



The thing about multi-stage festivals like ABF is that once a band has finished on one stage another act is immediately starting on another, so with only seconds to spare the swarm of music lovers made their way outside to the main stage, or as it is dubbed "The Aiken Stage," for Wisconsin's own Horseshoes and Hand Grenades. Horseshoes and Hand Grenades have blown me away each and every time I've had the pleasure of crossing paths with them, and this set under the hot southern sun was no exception. They are quite possibly the only bluegrass band that successfully utilizes the harmonica, and in my personal opinion more bands should try it. You wouldn't think a harmonica and a fiddle would sound so damn good together, but trust me they do. Their set was well received, and I'd be shocked if they didn't make at least a few new fans in Aiken this weekend. After their set we were forced to make the first decision of the day as The Kitchen Dwellers were doing an acoustic set out on the Campfire Stage and Lindsay Lou and her band were already tuning their instruments on the Steve's Hall stage. Having already seen The Kitchen Dwellers perform earlier, this decision was an easy one for me and we headed back inside to soak up a little air conditioning while grooving to the sounds of Ms. Lou.



I'd like to now take a minute to throw heaps of praise on the ABF organizers. After fifteen years of throwing this party, they have really learned how to adapt in ways to make the festival more enjoyable to those that attend. From the family friendly atmosphere they create with activities for the children, to the allowance of dogs, which is almost unheard of in this day and age, to the low-ticket prices, they really go out of their way to make their fest enjoyable for us attendees. Perhaps the biggest of these luxuries is the air-conditioned hall in which the side stage resides. So many music festivals ignore the weather and just let us bake outside in the heat all day. Not ABF, they have figured out a way to rotate the music so that we get moments of reprieve from the heat as the music moves indoors to an air-conditioned room. More festivals should look at ABF as inspiration, because as a veteran of music festivals, an air-conditioned side stage has to be, in my opinion, one of the greatest inventions of all time.

I digress though, because the sounds of Lindsay Lou are even more enjoyable than air conditioning on a hot day. During this, their first set of the weekend, Lindsay and her band really treated us to something special. I've heard more than one bluegrass fan lament that the "electrification" of Lindsay's sound has bummed them out, but I don't see how anyone that has actually given their new sound a chance wouldn't enjoy it. Don't get me wrong I totally understand why bluegrass purists would be turned off by electric guitars and drums and even, for this weekend's performances, a keyboard player. What I don't understand, however, is how those purists refuse to open their minds enough to realize that Lindsay and her band have evolved into something equally, if not more,

enjoyable. For this set Lindsay and her band treated us to a nice mix of Lindsay Lou originals, most notably “Sugar” and “Satellite” and covers that got the crowd moving like Grateful Dead’s “Eyes Of The World” and Bill Withers’ “I Wish You Well.” After Lindsay Lou’s set, it was again time to quickly move outside to the Aiken Stage for what turned out to be my favorite set of the day.

When given the task of writing about Billy Strings shows, I never know what to say. I mean he’s easily one of the most exciting things going on in live music today. If I were to write that he is the only guitarist on the scene that moves me as much as Jerry Garcia used to, I’d most likely just elicit eye rolls from those of you that aren’t hip to what Billy and his band have been doing for the last few years. However that comparison isn’t that far off – he gets so far lost in the music that often times it’s near impossible to tell who is having more fun, Billy or those of us in the audience. At one point during his set Billy lamented from stage that “we’ve all learned a lot about ourselves at Aiken, and if you don’t know what I’m talking about you’ll know by the end of the weekend.” I feel like he was being generous because if there was anyone in the crowd that didn’t learn something about themselves during his ninety-minute set, they most likely never will.



During their performance Billy and his band gave a clinic on bluegrass picking. As most festival sets are, the bulk of the set was made up of crowd-pleasing originals like “Turmoil & Tinfoil” and “Dust In The Baggie” as well as a few covers that really spoke to the audience. Songs like “Doin’ My Time” which they were playing at the precise moment the clouds rolled in and threatened to dump rain on all of us and Jackson Browne’s “Runnin’ On Empty” both had the crowd worked into a frenzy. Fortunately the rain barely fell allowing them to finish their set with a version of “Meet Me At The Creek” that was so intense it would’ve fit just as well at a Slayer

concert as it did at a bluegrass festival.

By the time Billy’s set had ended and we had made our way back inside Steve’s Hall, The Cris Jacobs Band was already on stage and midway through the first song of their set. I have caught The Cris Jacobs Band a few times now, and to be honest they’re just not my thing. I know many people really dig what Cris and his band’s style, so I am willing to admit that that is most likely on me, not on them. They truly are proficient at what they do. It’s just not something I seem to “get.”

The remainder of the evening was all about Keller Williams and The Keels. Not only did they do their thing on the “Aiken Stage” after Cris’ set, but they were also tapped to host the “Super Jam” to close day one. Keller, Larry and Jenny have been collaborating so long that they are as close to grizzled veterans as ABF had to offer. As much as people like to rag on Keller for his perceived cheesiness, there is no denying the fact that, when playing with Larry and Jenny, the music is about as on point as one could hope for. Their set had it all. Keller songs (“Breathe”), Larry songs (“Lizard Lady”), Keller & The Keels originals (“Crater”), Garcia/Hunter songs (“Dupree’s Diamond Blues”) crowd pleasing pop music covers (“Rehab” and “Livin’ La Vida Loca”), dirty Larry licks, groovy Jenny bass lines and even choreographed dance moves. Mr. Williams along with the “mayor and first lady of Aiken” put on a near perfect festival set that had everyone in attendance enjoying themselves to the utmost degree.

After a short break in action, our first of the day, the Super Jam kicked off in Steve’s Hall just after midnight. The Super Jam was essentially an extension of the Keller and The Keels set with an augmented band. Joining them were Zebulon Bowles on fiddle, Larry Keel Experience mandolinist Jared Pool, and a drummer, whom I didn’t recognize. This extended lineup was really heating up by the time I embarrassingly retired for the evening. I’m sure they put on a great set I was just personally too tired to make it past their thirty-minute mark before I headed off to bed to rest up for day two of *The Aiken Bluegrass Festival*.



Saturday, May 11, 2019:

The second day of the fifteenth annual Aiken Bluegrass Festival officially got under way with an early morning yoga session over near the Campfire Stage. If I were a betting man, I'd bet that most festival goers were still nursing their musical hangovers at that time of day. I'm sure, however, that the folks that chose to stretch in the early morning hours were better prepared for the long day of music we had ahead of us. Those of us that weren't up and moving in time for yoga instead eventually made our way to Steve's Hall and relied on Colorado's Tenth Mountain Division to loosen up our minds and bodies with their unique hybrid of bluegrass and rock n roll. They handled their task of kicking off the second day's worth of music quite well.

Once their short set was finished, the crowds gathered outside at the Aiken Stage for Lindsay Lou's second set of the weekend. This day's set leaned a little more on the bluegrass part of their sound than their Friday set did with Josh Rilko relying more on his mandolin playing and less on his electric guitar. Lindsay and her band were in great spirits and put on quite the performance. Opening with a gospel tinged version of Rev. Gary Davis' "Hallelujah I'm In The Band" they tore their way through a set that again contained a nice mixture of Lindsay Lou originals and cover songs. A few highlights included a currently unreleased song called "On Your Side," a rocking version of Canned Heat's "Going Up The Country" and an amazing set closing version of Lindsay's freshly released single "Keep On Going."



As soon as Lindsay's set was over it was time to rush back inside for the set I had been most looking forward to, Brad Parsons and Starbird. For those of you not in the know, Brad Parsons is an amazing singer/songwriter that recently relocated from Oregon to Georgia and Starbird is two parts American Babies (Justin Mazer and Al Smith) and one-part Cabinet (Dylan Skursky). Throw them all together into a musical stew and you have a band that will blow your mind every single time they play. Their set on Saturday afternoon was quite possibly the best set I've seen them play in their short time together. Not only did they work their normal magic as a four piece, but they also took turns separately

showcasing their own talents. About midway through their energetic set, Brad left the stage and the Starbird gang did an amazing instrumental tune that had elements of sixties era surf rock, calypso sounds, and even a bit of a Phishy feel that was an all-out musical assault with all three players performing at the peak of their abilities. Moments later, they relinquished the spotlight to Brad who did a solo version of his tune "Cold Apartment, Warm Girl" that brought tears to my eyes with its simple beauty. As great as they sound together, it was still a special treat to hear them highlight their own sounds as separate entities. By the time their set was over I don't know what was bigger, the sweat stains on my shirt or the shit-eating "we just destroyed you" grin on Brad's face.

Next up on the main stage was a brand-new band that called themselves Terrapin Mountain. Going into their set all we really knew about them was that they'd be doing an Old & In the Way tribute set. Once we showed up it was obvious we were in for a treat. Terrapin Mountain was put together solely for this gig by Doug Hegeman, who is apparently from a Midwest based Grateful Dead cover band. Doug tapped an amazing bunch of players to run through a set of those beloved Old & In The Way tunes. On bass was Greg Burns, who normally runs front of house for Greensky Bluegrass, and was apparently a very instrumental part in making the whole ABF experience run so smoothly. On banjo was Wavy Dave Burlingame of Cornmeal fame, and on mandolin was Lindsay Lou's own Josh Rilko. Over the course of their set they also had some help from Zeb Bowles on fiddle and Lindsay Lou herself, who joined them for an angelic version of "The Great Pretender." The entirety of their set was essentially an Old & In The Way greatest hits set with such crowd-pleasing favorites as "White Dove," "Wild Horses," "Land Of The Navajo," "Catfish John" and of course "Midnight Moonlight." For a spur of the moment band that had never played together, they really did an amazing job at interpreting these classic tunes.



Next up in Steve's Hall was Asheville, NC's Town Mountain, who I was bummed to miss. However, I'm glad I took a gamble on the Songwriters In The Round set that Benny "Burle" Galloway was hosting out on the "Campfire Stage" because, looking back, it was easily one of my favorite sets of the weekend. Burle, Brad Parsons, Lindsay Lou and Horseshoes and Hand Grenades' Adam Greuel took turns in the "hot seat" offering up acoustic versions of some of their favorite tunes. The set opened with Burle singing a tear-jerking version of "Behold The Rock Of Ages" which was dedicated to the recently deceased John Starling. From the crowd it seemed Burle was barely holding back his emotions while sending a song out to one of his musical heroes. From there the rest of the songwriters took turns offering up quiet yet heartwarming versions of their own tunes with the others adding accents when they felt comfortable doing so. After each amazing singer had taken a few turns Donna Hopkins joined in the fun with a version of her "Keep Talking Love" just as the first raindrops of the day began to fall.

As soon as the Songwriters In The Round set ended it was time for a sprint across the fairgrounds to make it to the Aiken Stage for the Larry Keel Experience (LKE) who were able to fit in about an hour's worth of music before the torrential rains rolled in and Larry screamed from the stage "Lightning! run for your lives!" Fortunately LKE was able to squeeze in the bulk of their set before we all were forced to take cover under whatever shelter we could find in an attempt to stay dry. The highlights of their abbreviated set included an awe-inspiring version of "Russian Lullaby" that eventually morphed into a distortion filled version of The Allman Brother's "Whipping Post." They also fit in a particularly enjoyable version of their original tune "One" and a take on Tom Petty's "Runnin' Down A Dream" that featured such amazing bass playing from Jenny, that I found myself wondering if maybe they should rename themselves the "Jenny Keel Experience."

Once the rain began to fall, it didn't stop for the remainder of the evening. The storms were so raging outside that it would've crippled most music festivals, but fortunately ABF had that indoor area already set up and were able to utilize it to keep the musical train rolling. Horseshoes and Hand Grenades were up next and again proved that they are a force to be reckoned with offering up yet another amazing set. Highlights of the set included an *a capella* version of the old Irish folk song "The Rattlin' Bog" that they managed to turn into a rollicking high energy drinking tune, a crowd pleasing cover of the Fleetwood Mac hit "Rhiannon" and a version of the old traditional number "Dig A Hole In The Meadow" or maybe it's called "Darlin' Corey." Whatever name you choose to use to identify it, they played it so well, and jammed it so hard, that it was quite possibly the best song played all weekend.

Because of the rain outside, the rest of the evening's festivities were forced inside. After a quick fifteen-minute set change, the festival's headliner The Del McCoury Band took their place on the Steve's Hall stage and worked their way through a set that was so magical that we were elated there was a backup plan for inclement weather. Del and his band's brand of traditional bluegrass had the entire crowd hanging on every single note coming from the stage. One thing I found interesting about Del's set was that the entire side stage "VIP" area was filled with just about every other musician that had played over the course of the weekend, and they all seemed to be enjoying their chance to catch a living legend as those of us that had paid to be there. When Del and his band left the stage, I'm assuming it was DJ Bontzilla spinning the house music, but to be honest I never actually saw him on stage so for all I know it



may have just been pre-recorded music being piped through the speakers for forty five minutes or so as Circles Around The Sun got ready for their portion of the evening.

Circles Around The Sun was another one of the bands I was very much looking forward to seeing this weekend and they didn't disappoint. Originally assembled as a band to create set break music for the Dead 50 celebrations a few years ago, I am very excited they decided to take this show on the road. Led by Neal Casal & Adam MacDougall, both of Chris Robinson's Brotherhood fame, they really did their best to remind us that despite what Del and his boys had just done on stage ABF was about far more than just bluegrass music. Their songs were even jammier than I had anticipated and at one point Neal proclaimed from the stage that this was "dance music." That statement couldn't have been more true as the packed hall was pulsating as one in rhythm to the music Circles was offering up.



In the live music world, a forty-five-minute set break isn't really that long, but after near constant music for the last thirty-six hours it seemed to last an eternity. Of course that might have also been because those forty-five minutes were just keeping us from what was probably the most anticipated set of the evening. I do not know if Billy String's Psychedelic Circus is strictly an ABF thing, but after being the most talked about set last year, they seemed to go out of their way to up the ante in their second year holding down the late-night slot at ABF. This year's version of The Psychedelic Circus was Billy Strings and The Cris Jacobs Band, who at times were augmented with special

guests Royal Masat, Lindsay Lou and Neal Casal. Together they ran through two sets of classic covers that had us all dancing until the wee hours of the morning. There were Grateful Dead tunes ("Althea"), Neil Young tunes ("Down By The River"), Zeppelin tunes ("Good Times," "Bad Times"), Jimi tunes ("Red House"), Pearl Jam Tunes ("Corduroy") and so much more. Honestly, I could probably go on for another five paragraphs or so just talking about this set. Talking about how Billy is just as much as mind blowing on electric guitar as he is on acoustic. I could write about how I may have unfairly written off Cris Jacobs and his band over the years. I could write about how bizarre it is for a festival's worth of bluegrass music fans to have so much fun head banging to Black Sabbath covers at 4:00 am. Instead I'll just urge you to seek out the recordings of this performance. They are out there and they're well worth your time.

Shortly after 4:00 am, Billy and his band finally ended with an "Aiko Aiko" encore as those that has soldiered through the night essentially collapsed into a sweaty collective mess before limping and staggering our way back to our tents or hotel rooms and celebrating the end of yet another amazing ABF. Let's give a huge shoutout to all the bands, volunteers, workers, organizers and music loving fans that made this year's Aiken Bluegrass Festival one for the ages. I don't know about the rest of you, but personally I'm already looking forward to seeing you all next Mother's Day weekend in western South Carolina.



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