

Forget Woodstock, We Had the Pop Festival

By Tim Wilton

For the next couple weeks or so, Kerrville will be the epicenter of live music in Texas as tens of thousands of music fans from across the country will come together at Quiet Valley Ranch for the latest edition of the Kerrville Folk Festival.

Being around every year since veteran festival organizer Rod Kennedy first gathered up thirteen acts to play in front of nearly 3,000 fans at the old 1,200-seat Kerrville Municipal Auditorium for three days back in June, 1972, the Kerrville Folk Festival and the relationship it has built with its namesake host city is a perfect example of successful “tie relations.” Specifically, the Folk Festival’s somewhat hippie-ish tie-dye set versus Kerrville’s somewhat conservative neck tie set.

Let’s face it; Kerrville is not exactly a bastion for hippies. *(Before I go any further, I have to disclose that I am using the word “hippie” very loosely. As a bonafide child of sixties/seventies-era hippies—yes, I was born in San Francisco in the early sixties, lived on Ashbury Street, and my siblings’ and my sometime babysitter was a neighbor who lived right up the block, a then unknown Jerry Garcia—I have a pretty good idea of what a hippie is, or at least, was. With few exceptions, most Festival goers today are at best weekend hippies. Don’t get me wrong, that is not a bad thing. But for lack of a better word, “hippie” will have to do for now.)* Generally, Kerrville has always been a stronghold of conservative values. We pay our respects to our fallen soldiers; we go to church every Sunday and most Wednesday nights; we hold bake sales to send our kids to band camp; we never miss a Friday night football game; we love our gas guzzling SUVs; we have more than our share of country music radio stations for a

town this size; and we hunt and fish every chance we get. In other words, we are the poster child of the Establishment. Heck, we ARE the Establishment.

But every year Kerrville heartily welcomes the mostly tie-dyed, long-haired, sandal wearing, patchouli scented, music loving, gather-around-the-camp-fire-and-sing types from all over the world for eighteen days of music and camaraderie, smack dab in the middle of Bush country. That, my friends, is the beauty and power of music's ability to harmoniously bring together different cultures.

But it wasn't always this way.

Take Lewisville for example. In 1969 its population was around 8,000 strong and, like most of Texas at the time, very conservative. Imagine their horror when news broke that a couple of young Dallas entrepreneurs were hastily putting together a three day music festival called the Texas International Pop Festival right in their own backyard over the approaching Labor Day weekend. To make matters worse for the sedate citizens of Lewisville, they soon began to hear horror stories from the media about another music festival that was unfolding before theirs and the world's eyes: Woodstock.

Nearly a half-million hippies had converged on tiny Bethel, New York in mid-August for "3 Days of Peace & Music." The organizers had expected 200,000 people to pay \$18 in advance or \$24 at the gate (for all three days) to listen to thirty-two of the best-known music acts of the day, including Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Janis Joplin, Santana, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, The Band and many, many others. But a few pranksters purposely cut open the fence surrounding the festival site, thus making it a totally free event. Not only did Bethel become something like the third largest city in the state of New York for one weekend, but it also became the largest parking lot in America, as miles of traffic on the two lane highway leading to Max Yasgur's 600 acre dairy farm came to a halt for the duration of the festival. In fact, performers had to be flown in by helicopter because it was impossible to drive into the venue in time to perform.

Of course, most of us are familiar with what happened at Woodstock thanks to the extraordinarily successful 1970 documentary movie, *Woodstock*. For four days (it was extended an extra day), the site of Woodstock was the de facto capital of counterculture. Love was free, drugs were rampant, minds were open, hedonism was the rule and the music was superb. On the other hand, the festival was poorly planned. There were not enough portable toilets or medical aid tents, and it was a logistical nightmare for the organizers and performers alike. Neighboring fields were trampled, and the New York Thruway had to be closed down. And throughout the four day affair, the New York press kept reporting about the negative aspects of the half-million strong gathering of hippies. In the minds of the buttoned up press, anytime you bring together this many hippies, nothing good could come out of it. And aware that their own small town was about to be “invaded” by this hippie nation, Lewisville went into panic mode.

Immediately, Lewisville mayor Sam Houston tried to have the Pop Festival cancelled. But without the right ordinances or permit restrictions in place, and with the site of the festival, the now-defunct Dallas International Speedway, already leased to the event’s organizers, there was little he or the town elders could do to stop it.

The event’s promoter and organizer, Angus Wynne III (whose father founded Six Flags Amusement Park), attended Woodstock and saw how poor planning could potentially derail things if left unchecked. In later interviews, Wynne would comment that he knew he would have to put up a “better fence” than the one that surrounded Woodstock. Additionally, Wynne and his partner, Jack Calmes, had the foresight to hire the soon to be retired police chief, Ralph Adams, as head of security. And in contrast to Woodstock, there was no heavy rain, no mud pits, no miles-long traffic jams, and no overcrowding. However, in keeping with the spirit of Woodstock, there was plenty of nude bathing at neighboring Lake Lewisville, which prompted Mayor Houston to proclaim public nudity against the law and threatened jail time for those who were caught.

Instead, the 120,000 in attendance were treated to three days of hot but dry weather, orderly crowds and top flight music acts, many of whom had just played Woodstock two weeks before, and all for only \$6.50 a day per person. These acts included B.B. King, Canned Heat, Chicago, Delaney and Bonnie and Friends, Johnny Winter, Nazz with Todd Rundgren, Sam and Dave, Santana, Sly and the Family Stone, Freddie King, Sweetwater, Ten Years After and many others, twenty-six acts in total, offering everything from pop to blues to psychedelic rock to heavy metal. The line-up was particularly unique because it featured a still relatively unknown band called Led Zeppelin, who were about to release their second album; and a definitely unknown band called Grand Funk Railroad, whose manager literally begged Wynne to let his group play the festival without pay. After Wynne was assured that the band would also pay all of their own expenses, Wynne let them open each day of the festival.

But perhaps the most notable performance was by Janis Joplin, who had left Texas only a few years earlier on a bad note. The Texas International Pop Festival was Joplin's triumphant return to her home state. In fact, according to newspaper accounts, Joplin had enthusiastically declared to the audience during a break in her set, "...Texas wasn't ever like this when I lived here."

And the expected skirmish between the locals and the hippies? It never happened. Joplin's remark may best sum up the three day music event because despite the Dallas media's attempt to negatively paint the festival as Lewisville's impending apocalypse, the Texas International Pop Festival came off without a hitch. There were plenty of portable toilets, first aid tents as well as a "trip tents", free food that was handed out each day by Wavy Gravy and the Hog Farmers and sponsored by Minnie Pearl, Inc. (yes, that Minnie Pearl)—in short, it was an orderly event. In fact, police chief Adams and Mayor Houston stood on stage on the closing day and commended the organizers and festival goers for their good behavior. Adams even said that other festivals could learn a thing or two from this crowd (of hippies). According to area

newspaper accounts, there were 35 drug related arrests and one heat related death. And after everything was said and done, Wynne and Calmes had lost over \$100,000.

However, according to the very well put together tribute website texaspopfestival.com, citizens of Lewisville were pleasantly surprised by the courtesy displayed by the hippie invaders. The hippies referred to people as either ma'am or sir, picked up garbage around town, and mowed a few lawns for free. Local merchants enjoyed the extra business, and besides the skinny dipping, there weren't any complaints from the citizenry.

Ah, the beauty and power of music.

Although there really isn't a lot of information about the Texas International Pop Festival available other than a handful of archived newspaper accounts and a few stories/interviews about Angus Wynne III, you can check out the aforementioned tribute site, www.texaspopfestival.com. The site has some fantastic photos from the festival, as well as some touching first person accounts. There are also a couple of related links you can check out and according to the website, there is a book in the works.