



Camping in Concert

AT THIS OUTDOOR FOLK-MUSIC FESTIVAL IN RURAL TEXAS, YOU'RE NOT A "KERRVIVOR" UNLESS YOU STAY TILL THE END

BY MINNA MORSE

I HAD JUST FALLEN INTO A deep slumber when my friend Larry clanked a metal coffee mug against the corner of a nearby trailer. "Rise and shine, sleepyhead," he chirped to me in his resonant Texas twang. I thought about burrowing deeper into my sleeping bag. I fantasized about clanking that mug upside Larry's head. Then I gave in and, on only a few hours' rest, crawled out of my tent into a brand-new day of song.

Shielding my eyes from the glaring Texas sun, I wondered how the regulars here survived night after night of playing music round the campfires. All that kept me from crawling back into my tent was the smell of coffee brewing at the makeshift country store across the road, the faint strumming from a few musicians already gathering at the picnic tables and the fear that Larry might clank his mug once more. Instead, he brought me a cup of joe.

This was morning at the annual Kerrville Folk Festival, an 18-day celebration in the rolling hill country of Texas. While by no means the largest event of its kind or the best known, Kerrville runs the longest and, among the musicians who play there, is the most beloved. On three outdoor stages, it showcases the talents of more than 75 featured performers and groups, offering as many as four concerts a day. In the 28 years since it was founded by former race-car driver and radio host Rod Kennedy, it has grown from a three-day affair to a marathon that draws tens of thousands of fans from all over the country.

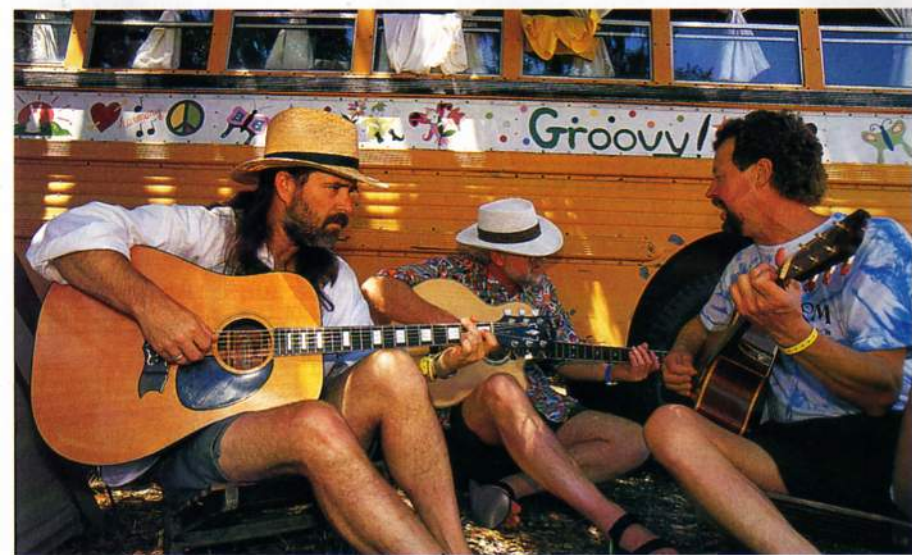
Set on a 50-acre ranch nine miles from the town of Kerrville, a little more than an hour's drive northwest of San Antonio, the festival has become a coveted venue for established stars like Mary Chapin Carpenter and Peter Dinklage of Peter, Paul and Mary. But it also provides a



At an impromptu gathering (above), musicians do what comes naturally outside a country store at the Kerrville Folk Festival. At night (below), fans dance during a concert.



temporary village for a tightly knit community of more than 3,000 devotees who camp out and make music—or just listen—pretty much round the clock. For the aspiring musicians among them, it offers a chance to schmooze and jam with some of the country's best.



A trio of true believers gets groovy (above) next to an RV-modified school bus. Camping in tents (top) and tarps is an integral part of the Kerrville experience.

About 550 of those making camp here are volunteer staff members, working to earn their meals and tickets. There are cooks and crafts vendors, stage crews and latrine cleaners. There's Happy Jack, the camp embroiderer, and Cookie, who'll sharpen your knives. There's even a squad of massage therapists who offer daily rubdowns to tired personnel. And then there's Larry, who works security with his mom, Lenore, stepdad, Vern, and their camp neighbor, a former clown named Sticky Paul.

Vern, a baker and talented woodworker, and Lenore, a philosophy professor, met at Kerrville and were married here under the Ballad Tree up on Chapel Hill. An abbreviated version of their joint moniker, LeVern, is displayed on the license plates of their motor home, which occupied the dusty patch of ground where I stood drinking my coffee. "This here," Vern told me proudly, referring to his vehicle and several other trailers and tents clustered nearby, "is Camp Peace of Mind." Scattered across the landscape

were hundreds of similar "camps" with all sorts of shelters, from three-walled "cabins" to the full-sized tepees that go up each year down in the meadow.

A sprightly guy with a full white beard and rainbow-colored beret, Vern seemed to have endless reserves of energy. Though he really needed to run off somewhere, he took the time to explain Kerrville's lexicon to me, from "Kerrgins" (first-timers) to "Kerrverts" (converts to the musical and spiritual high that is Kerrville) to "Kerrvivors" (anyone who stays the whole three weeks, as he and Lenore do). Never, I noted—fighting off a sleepy yawn—did he mention "Kerrfew."

I would be there only a few nights—a lengthy stay at most music festivals, perhaps, but an unusually brief one for Kerrville. I had always loved folk music—from political rally-cries, like those of Woody Guthrie or Bob Dylan, to romantic ballads; from country-blues to "world beat"—but I'd never become a regular on the folk circuit. I'd never hung out. But this time, I resolved to do just that.

I'd arrived on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, the first weekend of the festival, in time to see some of my favorites play at the evening Main Stage concert. The Four Bitchin' Babes were on the program, as was Ellis Paul, an artist I had discovered four years earlier, during my only other visit to Kerrville. A Boston-based musician who writes songs

that, says Mike Joyce of the *Washington Post*, "draw you in just as surely as a whispered secret," Paul had been on the Main Stage for the first time that year. The year before, in 1994, he'd won the Kerrville New Folk competition, an event that helped launch the careers of such popular performers as Lyle Lovett and Nanci Griffith. At each festival, the New Folk competition features singer-songwriters from across the country who may have local followings but are not yet nationally known.

This time around, I encountered Kevin So, another artist who'd gone from New Folk to Main Stage performer—though, unlike Paul, he hadn't won the award. He had come to Kerrville for the first time in 1996, "with absolutely no dough," and worked selling festival merchandise. After he was invited to be in the New Folk competition the following year, many of the volunteer staff showed up to root for him. Just two years later, he was featured on the Main Stage on Saturday night of the festival's opening

weekend. He was still revved from his crowd-pleasing performance when we spoke backstage.

So is a Chinese-American singer and songwriter whose work sometimes draws on that heritage but also ranges from blues to R & B to romantic ballads. He has acquired a large following at the festival—a process that began long before Saturday night's concert. "This place is all about the campfires," he told me. "That's where you really lay it down," chimed in his friend, singer Stephanie Corby.

With that idea in mind, I headed off into the night on



Ellis Paul performs on one of Kerrville's three outdoor stages. In 1994, he won the festival's competition for new singer-songwriters.

Sunday, with Larry as my guide, going from campfire to campfire. Or gathering to gathering, to be more accurate, for the circles were for the most part lit by kerosene lamps. And they were everywhere. "Hey, will you look at that," Larry said gleefully as we passed a crossroad by the latrines, where a cluster of people stood around the glow of a street-light. "It's a *bleeping* jam in the fork in the road."

I was like a kid in a candy store, entranced by all the possibilities and unable to commit to any one choice. At some point, Larry let me go off on my own, and I wandered from campfire to circus tent to tarp, wherever I heard music, staying here for five minutes to hear a woman sing out against corporate greed, and there to hear a folk-circuit elder masterfully pick a tune and then respectfully turn to a young kid who offered a heartfelt, albeit naive, new ballad.

As the night wore on, I tried desperately to find Camp Cuisine and Camp Nashville, the two places that I'd heard attracted the most talented musicians. I was so eager to have a genuine "campfire experience" that I didn't actually experience much at all. I just kept wandering from one thing to

another until finally, exhausted, I crawled into my sleeping bag. And then morning came, with Larry's clanking mug.

Monday's schedule was full—from a four-hour blues show, to the daily song-sharing under the Ballad Tree—capped off in the evening by a phenomenal lineup at the Main Stage. Like the night before, and the night before that, the theater area filled up with some 4,500 Kerrverts and other visitors for a six-hour, seven-act concert. At the end, Kerrville stalwart Peter Yarrow took the stage for his annual birthday sing-along.

As his set went on, Yarrow kept inviting more and more younger musicians to join him—including Kevin So—until the stage seemed almost as crowded as the audience. In his memoir, *Music From The Heart*, founder Rod Kennedy recalls an earlier festival: "The evening finale featured Peter Yarrow, reinforcing the togetherness he had helped to build from the beginning. . . . The audience joined in singing with damp eyes . . . almost not believing that this feeling of belonging together could move them so much."

All right, so it's sappy. OK, so I'm a sucker. But when the musicians and kids on that jam-packed stage started swaying and singing "Puff the Magic Dragon," it did my poor heart in.

After the concert, I was all set to hit the campfire circuit once more. But, I learned, that night—the end of the festival's five-day opening rush—was listed on the calendar (the "Kerr-lendar") as the "First Night of Sleep." After Yarrow's set, there was some faint strumming to be heard from far-flung corners of the ranch, but for the most part, by 2 A.M. or so, people had settled in.

Disappointed, I'd begun walking back to my tent when I suddenly heard the familiar voice of Ellis Paul and, sure enough, there he was, surrounded by a few stragglers at the corner Larry had dubbed the "jam in the fork in the road." Among them was Stephanie Corby, Kevin So's friend, singing harmony. Eventually Paul invited a few of us back to his camp, where he promised Stephanie he would do one more number.

So, finally, I got to see Camp Nashville. The night before, this Holy Grail of the campfire scene had doubtless been alive with song, crowded with musicians waiting their turn. Now it was quiet, with only the camp's residents lounging around before heading into their tents.

And then, lit by the moon, before a silhouette backdrop of the Texas hills, Corby joined Paul for one more song—titled, appropriately enough, "Last Call." Their voices floated up through the night sky, clear and sweet and pure. And as I sat there listening—sleep-deprived and beaming—I realized that the Holy Grail had indeed been found. I was now a Kerrvert. There would be no turning back. ❧