

The circle's still unbroken: MERLEFEST 2004

By Cory Albertson with Steve LaBate

There's a mountain chill in the air on this first Saturday of May, and The Walker Center—located 'on high' overlooking the Wilkes Community College campus—has not only become a beacon for Americana/roots music, but also for a joy rarely witnessed in today's industry-heavy landscape. Hosted by Swiss pickin' trio The Kruger Brothers, MerleFest's annual Midnight Jam kicks off with the fast and furious banjos of Jens Kruger and virtuoso Alison Brown.

But down a narrow hallway in a room sheltered from the sounds of the main stage, the pace is wonderfully chaotic as MerleFest's best are mingling and having their own, less scripted jam. Near a mostly neglected smorgasbord of catered fresh fruit and shrimp cocktails, the musicians are casually scattered around circular folding tables, instruments in hand. A few discreetly sip whiskey from a flask in the corner. This is, after all, a dry county.

Jerry Douglas collaborator Byron House, Nickel Creek's Chris Thile and Sean Watkins, Gillian Welch, David Rawlings, and—of all people to run into at a North Carolina bluegrass festival—Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones are pickin' their way through Grateful Dead tunes like "China Cat Sunflower" and the traditional "I Know You Rider." Who would've guessed?

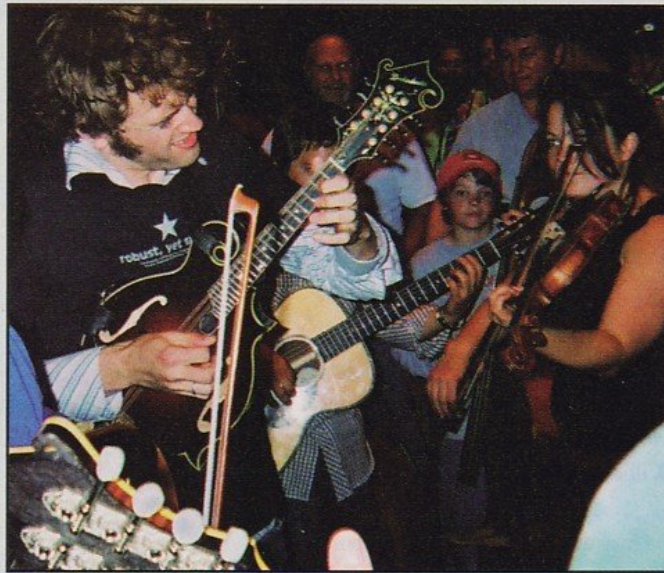
Mindy Smith and mandolin player Lex Price converse with acquaintances new and old as generations mesh socially and musically. Worlds collide when 20-year-old fiddler Tania Elizabeth of new Sugar Hill band The Duhks starts an impromptu duet with Jones on mandolin. With everyone in the room secretly aware and buzzing over the legendary rock 'n' roller's extraordinary presence, it isn't long until the makeshift backstage bluegrass troupe dives into an Appalachian rendition of Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker." While Jones smiles, watching the spontaneous tribute, Thile becomes so excited he raises his fingers in the "goat-horns salute" and yells, "That was so badass!"

Rawlings' Mom and Dad are backstage, and it's as if they're everyone's surrogate parents. They seem to know most of the musicians. Everyone loves them and wants to talk to them. By the end of the night, Jones is even inviting them to

England, trying to sell them on a vacation in his beloved homeland.

Back onstage, Brown and Kruger are finishing their set with "The Bear Song" and a high-speed tour of "This Land is Your Land." Many of the backstage pickers are beginning to filter to the main stage for the next jam, led by Welch and Rawlings. Welch guides Nickel Creek member Sara Watkins, fiddler Gabe Witcher, bassist House, and mandolin players Thile and Jones through an exquisitely mellow version of Eric Clapton's "After Midnight."

With his soft-spoken demeanor, you wouldn't think Rawlings would be much of a leader, but he's the biggest catalyst of the bunch—just glowing



with a quiet, positive energy. He and joker Thile provide the élan. And wherever they go, the energy and interest follow. Returning backstage after their set with Welch, they lead versions of Randy Newman's "Lonely at the Top" and "Love Please Come Home," a tune made famous by Bill Monroe.

With blond hair tucked under a red baseball cap, 12-year-old bassist Cameron Owens, fearlessly pushes his miniature upright bass right next to Byron House's looming normal-sized one. Rawlings steps in, giving a quick chord lesson to the young prodigy, who spends the rest of the night soaking up tips from these pros like a sponge. House and Rawlings take him under their wing, and you can see the genuine excitement on their faces when he picks up on what they're trying to teach him. The pureness of music is in Cameron's eyes—for him it's still about the joy of playing and not about the business. And back on the main stage you can see the same look in the eyes of all the musicians who came to jam.

Everyone—novices, masters, spectators—participates in an amazing finale of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," soulfully jumpstarted by vocalist/guitarist Joan Wernick. With the audience trickling out, the artists are slow to leave the stage. Thile, with his endless enthusiasm and prankster spirit, begins another jam toward the back of the stage. Others pick up their instruments and crowd around for a rip through The Beatles' "Tax Man." Welch, along with numerous hippie earth mothers, is dancing, while fiddlers Watkins, Witcher and Elizabeth have an impassioned musical face-off.

The pace stays intense through "My Old Town" and "Cabin Song." And by the fourth and final song, "Shenandoah Waltz," the audience is completely gone, leaving just the friends, colleagues and families of the players. But the night's excitement has reached a peak beautiful and pristine as the surrounding mountaintops. Each group of players—banjos, guitars, basses, fiddles, mandolins and vocalists—takes its turn waltzing and twirling together in the center of the circle that's formed.

It was a night that cut past all the music-industry nonsense, hearkening back to a time before music became big business—when the Saturday-night fish-fry was the biggest gig you could land. It wasn't about money or fame. It's just that live music was one of the only forms of entertainment available, be it at juke joints, house parties or on big-city street corners. Maybe what's wrong with music today is all this other stuff—CD distribution and record deals, MTV, stadiums, *Blender*, fame and celebrity culture, computer downloads and payola. It's all a huge distraction from what it's always really been about. When the hard work was done: the mine or factory shift over, the fields plowed, the cotton picked, the cows milked, or even further back—when the hunt was over—there was time for music. In every culture in the history of the world—music has been a celebration of life, as something to live for when the daily labor was finished. A momentary respite from the struggle of human existence.

Officially, the MerleFest Midnight Jam ended around 3:30 a.m. Its message, however, endures. The circle proved unbroken; a ring of fire of which generations past would've been proud. There was no pandering, parading, ego trips, business or politics on that magical Appalachian night. Just music.

Photo by Andrew Nelson: After the crowd files out of the auditorium at MerleFest's annual Midnight Jam, Nickel Creek mandolin player Chris Thile launches into The Beatles' "Taxman" with bandmate Sara Watkins on fiddle, and little Cameron Owens (middle) on miniature upright bass.