

KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL

NEW FOLK

PART 2

SONGWRITING COMPETITION

BY ROD KENNEDY &
Dalis Allen, Producer



This is a series about the competition at the Festival and its rich history of songwriters that have become a part of the festival during the past four decades. The list includes names like Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith, Lucinda Williams, Lynn Langham whose song 'Old Yellow Moon' just won a Grammy for Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, Hal Ketchum, Robert Earl Keen, James McMurry and Shawn Colvin. Many of you are familiar with and attend the concerts for the finalists and some have not even heard of this part of the Festival.

So I am beginning with the birth of it written by the Founder Rod Kennedy to give everyone a way to understand how and why this event came to have so much importance to songwriters and fans from all over the world. We have entries every year from almost every state and usually several other countries.

As we also celebrate the life of Rod Kennedy, our Founder and Producer for 31 years who passed from the earth on April 14 of this year, it is with great pride and some amount of sadness that I share his words about this part of the festival. He did not complete the third review and look back, so that too is now mine to complete.

Here is Part Two which is as much a look at the Festival as a whole as

it is just about New Folk, but it gives you an idea of how important a place New Folk and the support and encouragement for songwriters that exists at the festival has in that history. Rod references many of the names that have become familiar to so many that began their songwriting story at Kerrville.

NEW FOLK COMPETITIONS AT KERRVILLE II (1977-1981)

By 1977, financial losses from numerous Kerrville and Austin area rain damaged performances we produced began to catch up with us. But, thankfully, our fund-raising campaign to sign up 100 sponsors at \$100 gave us the seed money we needed to launch our 6th festival. In addition, our Van Cliburn concert and our Western Swing Festival, both in Austin, did well and gave us additional cash to work with.

Main stage artists over the May 26-29 four-day weekend included Bobby Bridger, Townes Van Zandt and Steve Young, all of whom served as 1977 New Folk judges, and the number of New Folk entries grew to 85.

Finalists included San Antonio's Naomi Shihab, Lindsay Haisley, Doak Sneed and Tim Henderson, all of whom would become main stage performers in coming years.

New Folk competitions were still held at the Arts & Crafts Fair on the Schreiner College campus. In addition, the six award winners received their \$50 awards at the Award Winners Concert on Sunday. While Peter Yarrow could not make the festival, his spirit was ever-present as Allen Damron and I co-hosted. Main stage high-

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lights at the ranch included appearances by Alex Harvey, Delbert McClinton, Tom Paxton, Marcia Ball, Ed Miller, Robert Shaw, Josh Graves with Roanoke and Guy Clark.

1978 saw 1977 New Folk Award Winners Eric Taylor, Rick Beresford, and Doak Sneed appearing on the folk festival's main stage along with established performers like Jimmy Driftwood, Joe Ely, Gary P Nunn, Townes Van Zandt, Buck White, Delbert McClinton, eclectic classical composer-conductor David Amram, Peter Yarrow and John Vandiver with the Shake Russell Band.

The 1978 New Folk entry list had increased to 105, and among the finalists were Colorado's Jon Ims, Austin's Nanci Griffith, and a young man named Stephen Earle from Wimberley.

Others whose names would be familiar soon included Jon Reed, Joseph Brunelle, and Vince Bell.

The competition continued to play at the Arts & Crafts Fair and judging were Gary P Nunn, Steven Fromholz, and Don Sanders.

Our New Folk judges in 1979 were Milton Carroll, Peter Rowen and B.W. Stevenson and the entries totaled 104.

Peter Yarrow was absent but Allen and I co-hosted. Among the finalists were Tish Hanley (Hinojosa) from San Antonio and repeat competitors Joseph Brunelle, Jon Ims, and Bill Oliver who became winners this year.

From the beginning, New Folk rules read that writers could enter 2 years in a row so long as they skipped the next year then they could enter again.

We recall that Bill Oliver entered more than a half dozen times over the years. John Ims became a great favorite nationally as did, of course, Tish Hinojosa.

On the five day May 24-28 festival main stage we saw Nanci Griffith debuting along with the appearances of B.W. Stevenson, Guy Clark, Gary P. Nunn, Ray Wylie

Hubbard, Willis Alan Ramsey, Billy Joe Shaver, Gibson and Camp, Marcia Ball, Butch Hancock, Alvin Crow, and Townes Van Zandt.

We also featured a reunion of Uncle Walt's Band (Walter Hyatt, Champ Hood, and David Ball) along with staging the first of three "Great Harmonica Blow-Offs".

The year 1979 also included in October, our first big on-the-road trip...6 performances in 4 days. We hired a Greyhound Bus and took Bobby Bridger, Milton Carroll, Allen Damron, Steve Fromholz, Bill & Bonnie Hearne, Don Sanders, Carolyn Hester, Robert Shaw, Kenneth Threadgill and John Vandiver.

We played at Texas State University, four shows at Houston's Rockefeller's, and the Temple Cultural Activity Center. We closed every concert with Bridger's "Heal in the Wisdom" first sung at the folk festival on May 25.

1980, our ninth Kerrville Folk Festival, May 22-26, was our largest festival to date with the audience growing to 13,000 for the five days.

We had daily opening sets by Austin's Eagle Bone Whistle and "Singing Circus" for the kids.

Our New Folk entry list had grown to 132 entries and our judges were Bob Gibson (who wrote "Abilene"), New York ragtime pianist-composer Terry Waldo and Guy Clark.

The competition was still at the Arts & Crafts Fair and while Peter Yarrow couldn't make the show his impact was evident everywhere as everyone was greeted by a hug.

1980 had some remarkable writers as finalists including Sid Hausman of New Mexico, Lyle Lovett, James Durst, and Jamie DeFratis from Florida. Among the award winners were David Halley of Lubbock, Jan Marra from Minneapolis, San Antonio's Dow Patterson, and Allen Ross from Carthage, MO. among others playing the Memorial Day Winners Concert at the

Arts & Crafts Fair.

A strong line-up of main stage artists at Quiet Valley Ranch included former New Folk Tish Hinojosa, Tim Henderson, Lucinda Williams, Butch Hancock, and Jon Ims joining headliners like Spider John Koerner, Gary P. Nunn, Townes Van Zandt, the Shake Russell-Dana Cooper Band, B. W. Stevenson, Guy Clark, Jimmy Driftwood, Bob Gibson, Joe Ely, Uncle Walt's Band, Kenneth Threadgill, Carolyn Hester, Peter Rowen and 22 others including the Masters Four southern gospel quartet and Tom Uhr's Shady Grove Ramblers with their beautifully harmonized original songs, blue grass, and Sons of the Pioneers favorites.

The 1981 New Folk competition was moved from the Arts & Crafts fairgrounds to the ranch in order to eliminate the distraction of hundreds of fair-goers walking through and past and around our audience going from exhibit area to exhibit area, and to finally, bring all our songwriter events to our own site. Instead of attracting at the fair, 300 or 400 casual in-out listeners, we instantly had a focused audience of more than 1000 for our 1981 New Folk event and eliminated all the running back and forth on a 20 mile round trip to the fair and back.

Judging the 1981 New Folk were Tom Uhr, Butch Hancock, and Bill Hearne. The number of New Folk entries continued to grow steadily year by year and by 1981, our 10th Anniversary, we had 177 entries from Texas, 12 other states and from as distant as England and Australia.

The assembled group of 40 finalists included a number of accomplished writers – the colorful Englishman Rory McCloud, Jerry Stevens (Root One), James Durst, Chuck Pyle, Larry Williams, Melissa Javors, and Kent Finlay, all of whom would find a place on our main stage in years to

come.

Our audition process annually revealed more promising writers unknown to us who did not make the finalists list. So we added 5 or 6 more prospects, most of whom were Texas writers, who would now appear to sing one song at the Ballad Tree on Chapel Hill. Among the 6 to appear there by invitation in 1981 was a youngster from Austin named Robert Keen.

The tradition of celebrating each five-year anniversary with an especially outstanding main stage line-up was reinforced on our expanded 1981 8-day -2-weekend festival. We added the long-desired second weekend: to the first Friday, Saturday and Sunday May 21-25 and added May 29-31. The line-up of annual favorites was brightened by a group of first-time standouts like "Gatemouth" Brown, Jimmie Gilmore, Odetta, Red River Dave, Riders in the Sky, Beto y los Fairlanes, Lisa (Eliza) Gilkyson, Turk Pipkin, Cypress Swamp Stompers, The Gypsies, Dan McCrimmon, Mariachi Infantil Guadalupe and Robin and Linda Williams to increase our roster to 60 performers.

The 2-weekend anniversary increased the number and variety of performers we could showcase while decreasing the crowded conditions of a single weekend event. We wanted to preserve the ambience of our intimate festival while increasing our performer roster to reduce our ever-growing waiting list. Our first attempt at expansion while experiencing growth at the gate, accommodated families with children still in school during our first weekend.

The New Folk Chronicles will continue in the next issue with interviews from some of the past Finalists about what it meant to them, how it affected their careers and where they are today.

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