

THE KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL:  
THE PATH TO KERR-VERSION

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by

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THE KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL:  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE KERRVILLE FOLK FESTIVAL: THE PATH TO KERR-VERSION**

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**SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: GARY HARTMAN**

This thesis explores the history of the Kerrville Folk Festival and explains how it has become a unique institution embedded within Texas history and culture. The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the origins, evolution, and current state of the Kerrville Folk Festival, as well as its long-term impact on musicians, audiences, and the national music scene. For nearly four decades, an extraordinary collection of singer-songwriters has played the main stage and campgrounds, drawing international acclaim to the festival as a place where singer-songwriters can thrive in a genuine and “organic” atmosphere. The festival’s history has been a long and often difficult one, but through the support and dedication of loyal festival-goers, bonds have been formed that created the foundation for the festival’s unique ambiance. This sense of community, along with the festival’s so-called “Kerr-culture,” draw attendees and musicians back every year.

The Kerrville Folk Festival is a unique and enduring institution which deserves recognition for the impact it has had on shaping the national music scene for nearly forty

years. My hope is that this study will provide the first academic analysis of this topic, and will allow festival-goers, volunteers, musicians, staff, and even those who have never attended, a chance to better understand the festival, its colorful history, and its importance to the overall musical heritage of the state and nation.

## **CHAPTER I:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kerrville. To some it is just a small hill country town in Central Texas. However, to others, the name has become synonymous with great singer-songwriters and original music, all because of the now internationally-famous Kerrville Folk Festival. The festival, which begins every Memorial Day weekend and spans eighteen days, has over the course of its thirty-eight year existence become a unique institution embedded within Texas history and culture. For many long-time festival regulars, it also serves as a family reunion of sorts. The sign posted at the entrance, “Welcome Home,” sums up the feeling many attendees experience when they return each year to Quiet Valley Ranch, where the festival is held.

Since the festival’s modest beginning in 1972, an extraordinary collection of singer-songwriters has played the main stage and in the campgrounds, including Lyle Lovett, the Dixie Chicks, Steve Earle, Randy Rogers, Terri Hendrix, Nanci Griffith, Bobby Bridger, Steven Fromholz, Tom Paxton, Guy Clark, Bob Gibson, Steve Gillette, David Amram, Carolyn Hester, Townes Van Zandt, Robert Earl Keen, and Peter, Paul, and Mary. Many of these nationally known artists are festival regulars and come back yearly to share music and good times with old friends.

Despite the important role that the Kerrville Folk Festival has played in cultivating and promoting songwriters in Texas, there has never been a comprehensive

study conducted about this, one of the longest continuously-running singer-songwriter festivals in the United States. Festival founder and producer Rod Kennedy's *Music From the Heart: The Fifty-Year Chronicle of His Life in Music (With a Few Sidetrips!)*, which meticulously details Kennedy's life and involvement in the Texas music scene, includes a discussion of the festival within the larger context of his life's work.<sup>1</sup> Dyanne Fry Cortez, a long-time volunteer and attendee of the festival, wrote a memoir entitled *Hot Jams and Cold Showers: Scenes from the Kerrville Folk Festival*, which recounts her experiences at the festival beginning with her first visit in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Although both books offer valuable insight into the history of the festival, neither takes a scholarly nor comprehensive approach to evaluating the festival's long-term historical significance on the larger musical culture of the state and nation.

Over the years, numerous newspaper articles have been written about the festival. Throughout the mid to late-1970s and 1980s two writers in particular, Bob Claypool of the *Houston Post* and Townsend Miller from the *Austin American-Statesman*, helped publicize the festival by introducing it to larger audiences across the state with their extensive coverage of all Kerrville events. These articles are particularly helpful, because they provide written documentation of the events, performers, successes, and failures throughout the festival's history.

Another source that helped publicize the festival is Arthur Wood's *Kerrville Kronicles*. This small British-based publication lists interviews, performer and CD reviews, festival information, and photos. Although this journal offers helpful insight into

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<sup>1</sup> Rod Kennedy, *Music From the Heart: The Fifty-Year Chronicle of His Life in Music (With a Few Sidetrips!)* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Dyanne Fry Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers: Scenes from the Kerrville Folk Festival* (Austin: Dos Puertas Publishing, 2000).

the event, it is not exclusively devoted to covering the Kerrville Folk Festival. In fact, most of the artist interviews rarely mention the festival, and the text does not provide any detailed description of all the happenings at each year's festival. However, the interviews are useful, because they highlight each musician's life and career. This helps place the importance of the various Kerrville performers into perspective on a broader scale and underscores the impact this Texas-based festival has had on the international music scene.

As the Kerrville Folk Festival gained attention across the United States over the years, many magazines, such as *Billboard*, *Texas Monthly*, *Playboy*, and others, published articles discussing various aspects of the festival's contributions to the national music scene. These articles are helpful by providing a wide range of opinions about the festival. There are also many books, such as *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties*, *The Handbook of Texas Music History*, and others, that highlight the importance of the festival and the impact it has had in helping to promote the careers of numerous singer-songwriters.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these publications, there are some Internet websites that include festival blogs, interviews, photos, and information from more recent festivals. As helpful as these sources are, none provides a thorough examination of the Kerrville Folk Festival and its importance to the national music scene. This thesis is intended to provide the first scholarly study of the Kerrville Folk Festival and its long-term historical significance.

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas R. Gruning, *Millennium Folk: American Folk Music Since the Sixties* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006); Roy Barkley, ed., *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003); Jan Reid, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock, New Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

In conducting research for this thesis, I consulted Rod Kennedy's archives at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, which include newspaper and magazine clippings, festival newsletters, correspondence among sponsors, musicians, and fans, financial documents, photos, festival programs, and brochures. These sources are very valuable in helping to piece together the events, changes, and challenges the festival underwent over the years.<sup>4</sup>

While the archives are a very beneficial source of information, they do present some problems. The content lists and organization of the individual boxes is not very user-friendly. For example, it would have been helpful if they had been arranged in a more detailed fashion or in chronological order. Another problem is that there are many folders which are supposed to contain documents, but in fact are empty. Unfortunately, there also is very little information on the financial dealings of the festival.

Because of problems with the research materials mentioned above, it became necessary to conduct oral interviews with festival musicians, staff, volunteers, and attendees in order to obtain needed information which was missing from other sources. These oral histories have also helped to add a more personal feel to the body of this work by supplementing holes in the written history and providing first-hand perspectives of how the festival has influenced the lives of so many attendees and musicians alike. As helpful as these oral histories are, they also can be problematic, because they rely on the interviewee's memory and perception, both of which are subject to bias, distortion, or inaccuracy. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully evaluate the veracity and relevance of the

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<sup>4</sup> Rod Kennedy Presents, Inc. Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

information gathered from these interviews and to cross-reference that information with written sources to ensure accuracy.

One of the most important themes that emerges after examining all of these sources is that there is a genuine and abiding sense of “community” among those who regularly attend the Kerrville Folk Festival. This communal identity is due in large part to Rod Kennedy’s commitment to provide an “organic” environment in which families can relax and escape from the daily grind of the city, get out into nature, and forget all of their worries and problems for a day, weekend, or for some, almost a month. The festival also strives to be unlike the typical rock or popular culture event by having a “no star” system for the musicians who perform. Every performer is paid the same amount of money and is listed either alphabetically or by show time on all advertisements. No one is given better treatment than anyone else, and this helps create a more relaxed and informal atmosphere with less of a feeling of competition. Every year people gather to take part in the impromptu jam sessions at the campsites where musicians of all levels congregate to share original songs. Musicians come to Kerrville every year not for the money, but instead for the pure pleasure of playing with their peers.

The festival also allows artists the opportunity to play before respectful crowds that genuinely want to hear the music. This attitude creates an ambiance that is markedly different from the typical “super-organic” nightclub setting, in which bar patrons often are more interested in partying than in listening attentively to the music. Ethnomusicologist Manuel Peña addresses the differences between “organic” and “super-organic” music, arguing that “organic” music represents a culturally meaningful expression of commonality centered on the music’s use-value or its importance to a local

community. By contrast, “super-organic” music is created through the commodification of music and is based on an exchange-value, thereby losing its “organic” connection with the audience.<sup>5</sup> The “organic” vs. “super-organic” model is helpful in providing new ways of thinking about traditional folk styles. However, it also is problematic, because the two classifications are very fluid, and most music today does not fit neatly into either category. While examining the history and long-term impact of the Kerrville Folk Festival, it will be important to consider the issues of “organic” and “super-organic” within the context of this annual event.

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the origins, evolution, and current state of the Kerrville Folk Festival, as well as its long-term impact on musicians, audiences, and the national music scene. Chapter One provides a brief background of Kerrville, the history of music festivals in Texas, and producer Rod Kennedy’s involvement in the Austin music scene before starting the folk festival. It will also explore the beginning stages of producing the festival, its expansion to the Quiet Valley Ranch, the numerous participants and volunteers that have enabled the festival to succeed, and the various events that occur at the festival every year. Chapter One will also discuss how the dedication and camaraderie present during these beginning years was so crucial to the identity of festival participants, as well as to the growth of the festival itself.

Chapter Two focuses on the festival’s “middle years,” including a series of financial challenges that ultimately led to the decision to file for bankruptcy. Despite this, organizers, with the help of local and national businesses, volunteers, and musicians,

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<sup>5</sup> Manuel Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 10.

were able to continue the festival. In fact, the festival has actually expanded the number of days and increased attendance levels. This chapter also discusses the importance of the festival's impromptu campfire jam sessions and the formation of a unique "Kerr-culture."

Chapter Three covers Rod Kennedy's decision in 1999 to sell the Quiet Valley Ranch and the festival to Vaughn Hafner and other investors from Dallas. It was around this time that Rod Kennedy decided to retire as producer and pass the torch of leadership on to his long-time assistant and co-producer Dalis Allen. This chapter will examine how the festival has changed under the leadership of Dalis Allen, as well as how it has retained so many of the traditions that have made it a world-famous musical institution. Finally, this chapter will assess how the Kerrville Folk Festival has helped to shape music in Texas and across the nation.

The Kerrville Folk Festival is a unique and enduring institution which deserves recognition for the impact it has had on shaping the national music scene for nearly forty years. My hope is that this study will allow festival-goers, volunteers, musicians, staff, and even those who have never attended, a chance to better understand the festival, its colorful history, and its importance to the overall musical heritage of the state and nation.

## **CHAPTER II:**

### **THE EARLY YEARS**

Driving west from Austin toward the Texas Hill Country, there is a sense of relief as the city lights and sounds fade into the distance. The meandering highways gradually become hillier and more scenic the further out of town you drive. Nature in the Hill Country is vibrant, and alive and deer, rabbits, armadillos, and other wildlife can be seen along the roadways. Numerous small historic towns scattered throughout the area welcome tourists with antique stores, wineries, outdoor adventures, and other opportunities for relaxation and recreation.

#### **A Brief History of Kerrville**

One of these well-known Texas Hill Country towns is Kerrville, which is located about one hundred miles west of Austin and sixty miles northwest of San Antonio. Known for its beautiful landscapes, rivers, ranches, and local culture, the city also boasts an interesting historical past. The first settler of Kerr County and the “Father” of Kerrville, Joshua D. Brown, formed one of the earliest wooden shingle camps in the upper Guadalupe River Territory in the 1840s.<sup>6</sup> The town was originally named Brownsburg, but was changed to Kerrsville and later to Kerrville in honor of Brown’s good friend

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<sup>6</sup> [www.kerrvilletexasvb.com/historypageupdated05.htm](http://www.kerrvilletexasvb.com/historypageupdated05.htm), accessed 11 October 2008.

James Kerr, a Major in the Republic of Texas Army and member of the Third Texas Congress.<sup>7</sup>

In 1857, Texas Ranger Captain Charles Schreiner and his brother-in-law, Casper Real, began a ranching business near Kerrville.<sup>8</sup> After serving in the Civil War, Schreiner opened a mercantile store that soon expanded into other endeavors, including a bank, a wool and mohair business, land and livestock, construction, and other means of helping to develop industry in the area.<sup>9</sup> Following a slight decline in growth during the Civil War, Kerrville began to boom again in the 1880s and 1890s due to cattle drives, railroad expansion, the introduction of paved roads, and the influx of telephone, electric, and water companies. Much of this development was a direct result of the Schreiner Family's business and philanthropic activities.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, Kerrville gained a national reputation for its beautiful scenery, abundant natural wildlife, exotic game animals, arts and crafts, and cultural events. As the ethnically and culturally diverse population grew, many new businesses moved into the area in order to capitalize on the year-round tourism industry. For four decades, the Kerrville Folk Festival has been one of the most important forces driving local tourism. Each year, the festival attracts tens of thousands of visitors to the area, helping to make Kerrville the vibrant tourist destination that it is today.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/KK/hek1.html>, accessed 11 October 2008; it is unclear as to whether Kerr actually ever set foot in the county named in his honor.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> [www.co.kerr.tx.us/historical/kerr\\_county.htm](http://www.co.kerr.tx.us/historical/kerr_county.htm), accessed 11 October 2008; this website offers a detailed history of Kerrville.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/KK/hek1.html>, accessed 11 October 2008.

## The Festival Tradition in Texas

Festivals have been an important cultural phenomenon throughout this nation since the pioneer days. Early festivals allowed settlers to come together to celebrate their culture, ethnic heritage, or religion through music, food, dance, and other means. Texas has a long, rich history of festivals, most of which attract large numbers of people eager to celebrate the diverse cultural traditions of the Southwest. Beginning in the 1840s, German Texans were some of the first to host regular singing festivals, or *Sängerfests*, which provided an opportunity for musical organizations from across the state to come together to celebrate German culture through song and dance.<sup>11</sup>

Czech immigrants, much like Germans, created singing societies and bands, which gathered at festivals and other events to help preserve their folk music traditions and sense of ethnic identity.<sup>12</sup> Texas-Mexican fiestas have long served as a way for *Tejanos* to celebrate the music and heritage of the Southwest's Hispanic culture. For all ethnic communities, music has been an important means of spreading culture, articulating a sense of identity, and passing along ideas and beliefs from one generation to the next.<sup>13</sup> Music festivals have been vital in providing an opportunity for people from various backgrounds to come together and share in the communal experience of celebrating the state's rich musical heritage.

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<sup>11</sup> Jean M. Heide, "Celebrating *Das Deutsche Lied* in Texas," *The Journal of Texas Music History*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 32-35; see also *A Chronological History of the Singers of German Songs in Texas*, by Oscar Haas, for a more complete historical account of German musical traditions in Texas; Larry Wolz, "The Roots of Classical Music in Texas: The German Contribution," in Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 124.

<sup>12</sup> Brandy Schnautz, "Czech Music," in Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 24-25, 34.

In many ways, the Kerrville Folk Festival is a continuation of this great festival tradition in Texas and the United States. However, it would be a mistake to think that the festival is narrowly limited to any specific type of music, simply because the word “folk” is included in the name. In fact, folk music can and should be defined rather broadly.<sup>14</sup> Depending on the time period and geographic location, the term can cover a broad range of musical styles. Some consider folk music to be an indigenous music that embodies the culture and identity of local people, or “folk,” including the music of all racial and ethnic communities living within a particular region.

### **Folk Music and Songwriting**

German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Gottfried von Herder introduced the term “folk” culture in the late eighteenth century in recognition of peasants and working-class people as being the source of a national culture.<sup>15</sup> This association of folk music with the culture of ordinary people remains valid even today. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such musicologists as Francis James Child and John and Alan Lomax traveled to remote areas around the United States in search of the “authentic music” of everyday Americans. Due to improvements in recording and broadcasting technology and the efforts of Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration to document the lives of ordinary people, the 1930s brought a new national appreciation for local folk culture and allowed audiences across the country to hear the music of other regions for the first time.

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<sup>14</sup> Francis E. Abernathy, “Folk Music,” in Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Gillian Mitchell, *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945-1980*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 8-9.

As the country's social and cultural climate changed during the mid-twentieth century, so did the attitudes of American youth. During the 1950s and 1960s, college students began organizing folk festivals, which highlighted the sort of organic musical traditions that were missing from mainstream pop music. Most often this music featured a variety of acoustic instruments, such as guitars, fiddles, mandolins, kazoos, and harmonicas, and emphasized original song lyrics. As a renewed national interest for folk music grew, George Wein and Albert Grossman organized a festival in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1959. Over the next several decades, the Newport Folk Festival would have a major impact on defining the notion of folk music for many Americans. At Newport, musicians and audiences blended traditional folk songs with more commercial pop music. This helped launch a new folk music "revival" movement that would have an enormous impact on mainstream popular music throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

In recent years, a number of scholars from a variety of disciplines have explored the phenomenon of folk music and its impact on other musical trends and culture. Neil Rosenberg's *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* has been a starting point for many interested in the study of folk music. Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* and Ronald Cohen's *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Revival and American Society, 1940 – 1970* provide excellent examinations of the revival of traditional music in America. Other scholars, such as Benjamin Filene and Bill Malone, have incorporated folk music into broader cultural histories. In *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and Roots*, Filene argues that, in the process of bringing to the public's attention a rather select group of roots musicians, early folklorists helped define what it

meant to be “authentic,” in terms of American folk music. In *Country Music USA*, Bill Malone looks at how folk music has impacted country music.<sup>16</sup>

Just as national attention on folk music has increased over the years, there also has been a growing interest in the unique musical traditions found in the Lone Star State. Rick Koster’s *Texas Music* and Gary Hartman’s *The History of Texas Music* show how the diverse range of ethnic musical genres have cross-pollinated over the years to produce a distinct musical environment in Texas.<sup>17</sup> These varied ethnic styles include Anglo, German, Czech, French, African, and Mexican, to name just a few. Also, *The Handbook of Texas Music* covers a wide variety of Texas music genres, musicians, events, and venues. *Dance Halls and Last Calls: A History of Texas Country Music* by Geronimo Treviño III and Jan Reid’s *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* trace the roots of country music across the Lone Star State. Other sources include *The Roots of Texas Music*, a compilation of essays edited by Lawrence Clayton and Joe Specht, Manuel Peña’s *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation*, and many articles found in the *Journal of Texas Music History*, all of which examine the tremendous ethnic diversity of music throughout the Southwest.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Neil V. Rosenberg, *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1996); Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Bill Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Hartman, “The Roots Run Deep: An Overview of Texas Music History,” in Clayton and Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Peña, *Música Tejana*; Rick Koster, *Texas Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*; Clayton and Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music*; Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*; Geronimo Treviño III, *Dance Halls and Last Calls: A History of Texas Country Music*. (Plano: Republic of Texas Press, 2002).

Storytelling and songwriting have long been an important part of the musical traditions of most ethnic communities. In the Southwest, where most ethnic groups had a relatively low rate of literacy up until the mid-twentieth century, ballads and other forms of musical storytelling provided early Texans with an effective way to communicate their history and culture to succeeding generations. As these musical traditions grew, Texans established a variety of festivals, clubs, dance halls, and other events throughout the state that allowed performers the chance to share their music with others.

Many important Texas songwriters from a variety of genres have profoundly influenced the national music scene. Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blues songster, born near Couchman, Texas, was known for playing around Deep Ellum in Dallas and was one of the first to achieve national popularity in the 1920s as a blues singer-guitarist.<sup>19</sup> Cindy Walker, born in Mart, Texas, on July 20, 1918, wrote pop and country hits for a variety of national artists, including Ernest Tubb, Ray Charles, Dean Martin, Roy Orbison, Bing Crosby, and Bob Wills, all at a time when men dominated the songwriting industry.<sup>20</sup> Songwriter, guitarist, and vocal stylist, Floyd Tillman grew up in Post, Texas, and had a major impact on the honky-tonk style of country. Scott Joplin, born and raised near Texarkana, Texas, was the most famous and influential composer of ragtime music, combining blues and gospel with classical influences to write numerous songs that would be included in operas, ballets, and movies.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alan Govenar, "Blind Lemon Jefferson," in Barkley, ed., *Handbook of Texas Music*, 159-161.

<sup>20</sup> Specht, "Put a Nickel in the Jukebox: The Texas Tradition in Country Music, 1922-50," in Clayton and Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music*, 84-86; Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, 184.

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Albrecht, "Scott Joplin," in Barkley, ed., *The Handbook of Texas Music*, 171; Wolz, "Roots of Classical Music in Texas: The German Contribution," *The Roots of Texas Music*, 134-135.

More recently, such Texas-born or Texas-based artists as Carolyn Hester, Bobby Bridger, Townes Van Zandt, Lyle Lovett, Kris Kristofferson, Guy Clark, Robert Earl Keen, Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith, Willie Nelson, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Eliza Gilkyson, Sara Hickman, and others have reinforced the state's reputation as a hotbed for songwriting. Several of these influential artists, in fact, got some of their first national exposure at the Kerrville Folk Festival. Following in the footsteps of these earlier musicians, dozens of younger songwriters come to the festival each year to share their original songs and musical talents in an open and inviting atmosphere and to develop their craft as professional songsmiths.

### **The Kerrville Folk Festival Begins**

The origins of the Kerrville Folk Festival can be traced back to December 1971 when Maury Coats, executive director of the Texas Commission on the Arts and Humanities, mentioned to Rod Kennedy that the Texas Tourist Development Agency planned to hold a new Texas State Arts and Crafts Fair in Kerrville the following June. Because no funding was available through the state legislature, Coats wanted someone to privately fund a folk music festival that would correspond with the fair.<sup>22</sup>

Rod Kennedy was already well known for organizing a variety of musical events in the Austin area. Born and raised in a musical family in Buffalo, New York, Kennedy moved to Texas in the 1950s after a stint in the Marines. While attending school at the University of Texas at Austin, Kennedy raised enough money to help start the campus-

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<sup>22</sup> 1981 Festival Program, "Texas Music at Kerrville: The First 10 Years, 1972-1981," Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History (C.A.H.), University of Texas at Austin (U.T.); all reference to the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin from this point on will refer to it as C.A.H., U.T.

based radio station, KUT-FM. Eventually he purchased KHFI-FM, which broadcast classical music, and he later added an AM counterpart that played a variety of other musical genres. It was also during this time that he met and married his wife, Nancy Lee Davis.

While working in radio during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kennedy became increasingly involved in organizing a variety of events, which would help shape the emerging live music scene in Austin. During the 1960s and 1970s, Kennedy also promoted arts events, such as ballets and theater plays, and produced the Zilker Park Summer Music Festival Series and the Longhorn Jazz Festivals.<sup>23</sup> In addition to his musical pursuits, Kennedy became an avid driver and collector of racing cars.

As his circle of friends in the music business continued to grow throughout the 1960s, Kennedy opened the Chequered Flag nightclub in downtown Austin as a venue in which they could congregate and perform. Here, many singer-songwriters and progressive country musicians, such as Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Michael Martin Murphey, Carolyn Hester, Allen Damron, Townes Van Zandt, and Rusty Weir, gained valuable experience before going on to become professional recording artists.<sup>24</sup> Kennedy's involvement in radio, nightclub management, and festival production earned him a regional reputation as an event organizer and helped set the stage for launching the event for which he would become nationally-renowned, the Kerrville Folk Festival.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.rodkenedy.com/aboutus.htm>, accessed 9 March 2009; Robert McCourkle, "The Impresario of Folk," *Southwest Airlines Magazine*, vol. 11, no. 2, September 1981, pg 70-86, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>24</sup> Annette Raburn, "Rod Kennedy: The Spirit Behind Kerrville," *Rumors, Gossip, Lies and Dreams*. June 1, 1978, pg. 16, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

It was Kennedy's growing reputation as a successful event producer in Austin that brought him to Maury Coats's attention as someone who might be interested in producing a music festival to coincide with the arts and crafts fair in Kerrville. Following Coats's request in early 1972, Kennedy traveled to Kerrville to assess the situation. After researching the area, Kennedy located an auditorium that was available during the weekend of June 1-3, 1972, the proposed time of the fair. In March, the city clerk compiled a contract for the auditorium, and Kennedy finalized the arrangements after a series of meetings with Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Ed Phelps, Gene Ball of the Hill Country Arts Foundation, Bill Dozier, publisher of the *Kerrville Daily Times*, Tom Joyner, manager of KERV radio station, and Naomi Ingram, owner of the Del Norte Restaurant, in order to share ideas and coordinate a strategy.<sup>25</sup> Two weeks later, fair organizers held an area-wide briefing at the Municipal Auditorium to discuss Kerr County tourism, including the announcement of their plans to organize the fair. Kennedy brought along his friend and festival performer Allen Damron to demonstrate to ambivalent local residents what type of music to expect.<sup>26</sup>

Kennedy told attendees of the briefing that the opening night shows would be "dedicated to the people of Kerrville and would be co-sponsored by the *Kerrville Daily Times* and the radio station KERV."<sup>27</sup> After listening to all of the specifics about the event and hearing Allen Damron perform, the audience warmed to the idea of having a high-profile musical event in Kerrville. The crowd became even more accepting with the

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<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, Texas, 8 April 2009; Kennedy said that he brought in Allen Damron because he was a clean-cut, clean-shaven singer in hopes of showing the crowd that this festival was not just about sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

announcement of an opening night appearance by Kenneth Threadgill, legendary Austin musician and club owner, as well as native Texan and nationally-known folk singer Carolyn Hester.

Soon, Kennedy confirmed a number of other musicians scheduled to appear at the festival. These included Michael Martin Murphey, a pop and country singer-songwriter who helped bring the Austin music scene to national attention in the 1970s with such hits as “Geronimo’s Cadillac” and “Wildfire,” Dick Barrett, an old-time, Depression-era competition fiddler known for his breakdown jams, and Mance Lipscomb, a popular African-American blues and ballad player. Other artists who agreed to appear at the event included John Lomax, Jr., the head of the Houston Folklore Society and son of legendary folk music archivist John Lomax, Sr., Robert Shaw, a barrelhouse blues piano player, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, a husband and wife singer-songwriter duo, Ray Wylie Hubbard and his band Texas Fever, previously known as Three Faces West (a regular at Kennedy’s Chequered Flag), and Steven Fromholz, a progressive Texas country singer-songwriter.

For festival funding, Kennedy decided to stay local and opened a festival bank account at the Schreiner Bank in Kerrville. After the March meetings concluded, Allen Damron and Rod Kennedy returned to Austin to work on fine-tuning the details for the event. As time drew near, Kennedy made a major effort to send out promotional information and press releases to newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations in hopes of gaining as much publicity as possible.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time that he was preparing for the festival, Kennedy remained involved in several other projects, including a five-day tour with musician Peter Yarrow,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

of the folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary. It was on this tour that the two bonded and formed a life-long business and personal friendship. It was also during the hours of driving together on the road that Yarrow asked to be a part of the Kerrville Festival.<sup>29</sup> Yarrow suggested that Kennedy consider including a New Folk Competition, similar to the one offered at the Newport Folk Festival. This would give up-and-coming singer-songwriters a chance to showcase original pieces in front of an audience and possibly gain the attention of recording companies. Kennedy liked the idea, and, after the tour, began working on adding this event to the schedule.

The arts and crafts fair was a five-day event with one hundred and seventy-seven exhibitors on the campus of Schreiner College in Kerrville. The concerts were held in the evening a few blocks away from the college, but Kennedy also hosted festival events on the fair grounds during the daytime. Rod Kennedy and his wife NancyLee arrived on the Wednesday before the festival to make sure everything was in order and ready to go. Business manager Joe Bermea, box office helper Doug Crossland, recording engineer Pedro Gutierrez, Dick Goodwin, who volunteered to run the sound at the evening shows, Dean Rayburn from Spirit Sound of San Angelo who volunteered to help with the daytime events, Allen Damron, Peter Yarrow, and all the opening acts arrived the following day. There was also a last minute addition of the Flatlanders, a quintet from Lubbock that included Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, and Joe Ely.<sup>30</sup>

Former President Lyndon B. Johnson, his wife, and a few friends even attended the evening concert, making headlines across the country.<sup>31</sup> The opening evening's

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com/newfolk.htm>, Part One, accessed 11 October 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 129-130.

performers included Carolyn Hester, Kenneth Threadgill, John Lomax, Jr., Texas Fever with Ray Wylie Hubbard, the Flatlanders, and a surprise two-song appearance by Peter Yarrow to end the night.

Peter Yarrow hosted the New Folk Singer-Songwriters Competition Friday afternoon on the fair grounds with around two-dozen performers that responded to the call for original songwriters in advertisements across Texas. These included Bill Priest, Kurt Van Sickle, Sunny Schulman, Bobby Bridger, the trio Mac Truck Amateur Night, Carlton S. White, and the Flatlanders.<sup>32</sup> The New Folk Competition went on until almost 7:00 that evening, and Rod Kennedy, Allen Damron, and Carolyn Hester worked together to make sure everything ran smoothly. As Kennedy remembers, there were not actual winners for the first two years of the New Folk Competition. The competition just provided a platform for and recognition to unknown singer-songwriters. As Kennedy mentions, many musicians considered themselves winners if they were invited back to play the main stage the following year. However, until Kennedy and the Kerrville Music Foundation established rules, there were no actual winners.<sup>33</sup>

Eager fans waited at the door hoping to get the best first-come-first-served seats in the auditorium for the first night's performances. Peter Yarrow hosted this Friday evening concert that included Allen Damron, Mance Lipscomb, Dick Barrett, Carolyn Hester, and Michael Martin Murphey. To top off the evening, Peter Yarrow's performance spread the genuine feeling of togetherness to all in attendance. This sentiment of unity and intimacy experienced at the first festival blossomed over the years

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 8 April 2009.

as performers and attendees continued to share many special moments with one another. Kennedy attributes Yarrow's loving spirit as being responsible for what created the foundation for the unique environment that the festival is renowned for.<sup>34</sup>

The following afternoon, Carolyn Hester, Mance Lipscomb, Robert Shaw, and other musicians held a Blues Workshop, where artists integrated both old blues techniques and newer contemporary styles. There was another large turnout for the evening concert that featured Allen Damron, Robert Shaw, Segle Fry, accompanied by Travis Holland, Mance Lipscomb, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, and Steven Fromholz. Kenneth Threadgill had so much fun on the opening evening that he returned for another performance that included singing and yodeling more Jimmie Rodgers songs.<sup>35</sup> To close the evening, all the performers came back on stage and were joined by the audience in singing Woody Guthrie's tune "This Land is Your Land."

On Sunday afternoon, Rev. Charles Sumners, Jr., along with three other ministers, and ten Austin musicians hosted a non-denominational folk song service "based on the 'Rejoice' Folk Mass of the Episcopal Church" on the fair grounds.<sup>36</sup> Many in attendance stated that this was a very soulful and spiritual experience. Due to the success of the festival and the arts and crafts fair, Rod Kennedy and his team made many new partnerships and friendships, which they would build on in the future. Kennedy agreed to come back in 1973 to do it again.

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<sup>34</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 8 April 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 133-134.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

### 1973: A Second Year in Kerrville

In the off-season, Rod Kennedy stayed busy with numerous other endeavors. As part of an effort to continue building a positive relationship with local residents, Kennedy also organized several special concert events in Kerrville, particularly at the auditorium where he knew there was ample room on stage for larger groups.

As planning for the second year began, Kennedy decided to expand the festival to five evening concerts in four nights. This included two concerts on Saturday, which featured the same musicians performing the same sets for two different audiences. In addition to the New Folk concert that took place on Friday afternoon, Kennedy added a second afternoon session on Saturday, because the number of entries into the competition almost doubled in 1973. Another change to the second festival was the inclusion of a Texas Old-Time Fiddlers' Contest on Sunday afternoon, in which the grand prize winner would receive a one hundred dollar bonus and have the honor of playing on stage with Dick Barrett.

1973 witnessed the return of ten performers from the first festival, including Dick Barrett, Allen Damron, Steven Fromholz, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Carolyn Hester, Mance Lipscomb, Michael Martin Murphey, Robert Shaw, Kenneth Threadgill, and Peter Yarrow.<sup>37</sup> The doors to the auditorium opened an hour earlier to accommodate the large crowd waiting to enter. A singing family, the Threadgills, opened the evening, followed by Steven Fromholz and Ewing Street Times from Houston. Bobby Bridger, a new folk participant from 1972, replaced Mance Lipscomb who was absent due to illness. Future country superstar Willie Nelson also performed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 1973 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

Friday afternoon, Peter Yarrow hosted the first day of the New Folk Competition, featuring Bill Priest, Doug Gittings, Plum Nelly and Bill Stoner, Bill Oliver, and Bill Sparks.<sup>39</sup> Timberline Rose, which included Richard Dean and Jim Schulman, opened the night and then came back on stage to accompany Jim's sister Sunny, a 1972 New Folk participant, for the second act of the evening. Other musicians who appeared Friday were Kenneth Threadgill, The Bluegrass Ramblers, and Peter Yarrow. Because the musicians were limited to thirty-minute sets, Kennedy rented out Alta Loma Lodges in Ingram where everyone could continue to play, mingle, and eat after the evening concerts ended.<sup>40</sup>

Saturday, Allen Damron hosted the second part of the New Folk Competition that included Jim Ritchey, Mac Truck Amateur Night, Michele Murphey, and Lynn Langham.<sup>41</sup> The Saturday evening concerts were different from all the other evening attractions. There were two evening shows, one at 6:00 and a second at 10:00 that attracted such nationally known acts as Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Allen Damron, and Robert Shaw.<sup>42</sup> Because of a large audience turnout, many people frantically pushed and shoved their way inside the auditorium before the second show started. Fortunately, no one was injured, but Rod Kennedy decided that the festival had outgrown the auditorium and would need to be moved

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<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 145-146.

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 149.

outdoors in 1974 to avoid the kind of chaos that had occurred at other crowded festivals.<sup>43</sup>

Sunday brought a return of the Folk Mass celebration and the Fiddlers' Competition, both of which were very popular. The Sunday evening concert featured Townes Van Zandt, Big Bill Moss, Dick Barrett and his family of musicians. Others included the fiddler contest winner, the Royal Light Singers (an eight-member veteran gospel group from Austin), Carolyn Hester, and B.W. Stevenson. The concert ended with all of the performers on stage singing a powerful version of "This Land is Your Land," joined by an audience of more than one thousand. Pedro Gutierrez recorded the performances, and twenty-three radio stations from across the country requested copies.<sup>44</sup>

### **1974: Expanding to Quiet Valley Ranch**

Since attendance doubled between 1972 and 1973 to over fifty-six hundred for the entire weekend, Rod Kennedy and his wife Nancy Lee began to search for an outdoor location that would provide a long-term home for the festival. This proved difficult, however. Kennedy recalls how they encountered "many dead ends in locating a suitable site, and a couple of properties had been pulled off the market when the sellers learned that we wanted to produce outdoor music festivals."<sup>45</sup>

Despite these setbacks, the Kennedy family found a sixty-three acre ranch nine miles south of Kerrville on Highway 16. The property included rolling hills, rocky

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<sup>43</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 8 April 2009; Kennedy points out that, at Newport, a crowd of kids tried to get in to the festival after it was sold out. They pushed down fences, so the police had to turn hoses on them to bring the crowds under control.

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 153, 157.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

hillsides, and native trees such as cedar, mesquite, and oak, many of which had been destroyed by a fire a few months earlier.<sup>46</sup> The Kennedys closed on the property in December, paying around seven hundred and fifty dollars an acre.<sup>47</sup> They decided to name it Quiet Valley Ranch, in hopes of reassuring neighbors who worried that the festival grounds might become a haven for rock and roll music.<sup>48</sup> Kennedy recalls that they “were accused of just about everything that first year, and I guess to the townspeople it looked like every hippie in the country was converging on Kerrville.”<sup>49</sup>

With help from their new neighbor, Ace Hindman, the Kennedys went to work on December 26, 1973, and did not stop until they were ready for the opening of the festival. Their first job was to tag all the trees deemed salvageable, although they would be forced to bulldoze around fifteen thousand charred cedar stumps that could not be saved.<sup>50</sup> Afterwards, they planted new grass and laid four hundred seedlings and saplings including cottonwoods, fruitless mulberry, pecan, Arizona ash, box elder, sycamore, and chestnut oak to help revitalize the ranch.<sup>51</sup> It was actually Nancy Lee Kennedy who took a particular interest in the plant life on the ranch. Because Rod Kennedy was still attending

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<sup>46</sup> Bill Sloan and Lana Henderson, “The Hills are Alive with the Sounds of Music,” *Scene Magazine*, August 27, 1978, pg. 8-13, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>47</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 8 April 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 159.

<sup>49</sup> Sloan and Henderson, “The Hills are Alive,” *Scene Magazine*, pg. 8-13.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> McCourkle, “The Impresario of Folk,” *Southwest Airlines Magazine*, pg 70-86, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

to his Austin business, she drove around daily in her jeep with jugs of water tending to all of the newly planted seeds.<sup>52</sup>

After traversing the land, they decided that once cleared, the north twenty acres would be best for a campground area, and the south side meadow would be suitable for parking up to a thousand cars.<sup>53</sup> The central area on the western property line made a natural amphitheater in which they placed sixty craft booths and portable concession buildings, a covered stage area, and dressing rooms. They also acquired a number of World War II outdoor movie seats from the University of Texas at a cost around fifty-six thousand dollars.<sup>54</sup> Bandera Electric Coop strung power lines, and Tucker Pump Company put in a six hundred and thirty-five foot well and a ten thousand gallon storage tank for the public water system.<sup>55</sup> Rod and Nancy Lee Kennedy brought in an old real estate sales office as their home, which was sectioned off from the rest of the grounds on the south end of the ranch.

The 1974 festival secured four sponsors: Schreiner Bank, *Kerrville Daily Times*, Joe's Western Wear, and Swiss Chef Hans Schlunegger's Alpine Lodge Restaurant.<sup>56</sup> The festival was set to take place May 23-26 as four evening concerts, featuring around six to seven performers a night, as well as the daytime events taking place on the fair

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<sup>52</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 8 April 2009.

<sup>53</sup> There was also a small body of water on the ranch that Kennedy planned to section off for swimming. However, his lawyer pointed out that this could be a liability. So, Kennedy decided to sell this portion of the ranch to Allen Damron.

<sup>54</sup> McCourkle, "The Impresario of Folk," pg 70-86, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.; Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 160.

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 160; Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 162.

grounds. The mailing lists from the office included addresses from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, New Mexico, Tennessee, California, Washington, D.C., and New York, all reflecting the festival's growing national popularity.<sup>57</sup>

To help calm concerns from the community about potential hazards and litter that might be caused by the festival, Rod Kennedy held a free bluegrass concert and a press reception on May 11, 1974. This also provided a way for people to preview the grounds and give back to the community by collecting six cans or bottles as an entrance fee.<sup>58</sup> This gesture let locals know that those involved with the festival were listening to their concerns and cared about keeping the area beautiful, too. It also offered a way for staff and volunteers to practice their procedures before the festival began.

Ed Wallace, an area lawyer, was responsible for insuring that all of the proper permits were obtained by the Kerr County Commissioner. By the time May rolled around, all issues were negotiated, permits obtained, and The Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission was out to monitor the event. The only thing that would have to wait another year was the campground, which still needed to be cleared. The number of staff members and volunteers had to be increased in order to accomplish the many tasks needed for the weekend to run smoothly. As before, Spirit Sound provided sound. Joe Bermea from the Austin office served as Business Manager. Doug Gittings and David Houston ran the box office. Pedro Gutierrez returned to record the performances for another LP. Partain and Damron helped with stage announcements. John Hargis parked cars, and Alan Tillman headed up Security.<sup>59</sup> There were an additional twenty-five people

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<sup>57</sup> 1974 Festival Mailing List, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/16, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>58</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 162.

on staff, but one member to note was Dalis Allen, whose connection to the festival and music would continue to grow over the years.<sup>60</sup>

In memo notes to the performers, Kennedy laid out the rules. Camping on the ranch was limited to thirty-five staff. Hotel reservations were set up at the Del Norte Motel on Highway 27 in Kerrville. If performers wanted to stay the entire weekend, there was also camping available at the Kerrville State Park for one dollar a day. There would be no late night partying at the campgrounds, however, because a group of older people had been camping every Memorial Day Weekend for twenty-five years and did not want to be disturbed by unruly guests. Performers were also instructed to limit their sets on stage to twenty-five or thirty minutes. They would need to check in between 2:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon the day of their performance in order to get their festival passes.<sup>61</sup>

The festival started just a half hour late on Thursday evening. The crowd of twelve hundred people heard such performers as Robert Shaw, Willis Alan Ramsey, Tex-Mex accordionist Flaco Jiménez, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Townes Van Zandt, and Plum Nelly, which included Jerry Jo Jones, Bill Stoner, Benny Thurman, and Ernie Gammage.<sup>62</sup> The New Folk Competition was spread over Friday, Saturday, and Sunday afternoons as fifty-four finalists, including Lucinda Williams, Gosney Thornton, Denim,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>60</sup> 1974 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T. The full staff included: Rick Stein, Mary Johnston, Patty Copman, Ann Gates, Rob Fisher, Carolyn Cochran, Denise Goldsmith, Jennifer Jeans, Carol Battersby, John Hargis, Tony Ullrich, Tim York, Carol Collins-Baer, Nancy Ford, Ann Scarborough, Tom Wescoat, Polly Coffin, Mac Partain, Dalis Allen, Steve Purvis, Lynn Langham, Super Friends of Kerrville, Jim Richie, and Sandy Mobly.

<sup>61</sup> 1974 Festival Memo to Performers, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>62</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 166; Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 41.

Rick Stein, Lou-Ray, and Vince Bell performed.<sup>63</sup> Evening concerts included Bill Priest and Jimmy Johnson, Riley Osbourn, and Chubby Wise. The seven-member western swing group Asleep at the Wheel helped cover a last minute cancellation by Uncle Walt's Band. The second annual Texas Old-Time Fiddlers' Contest followed another Folk Mass Sunday afternoon at the fair. The 1974 festival ended up drawing around six thousand people, which allowed Kennedy to break even on expenses.<sup>64</sup>

Because there was no other venue in the Southwest at the time that provided an arena to foster this type of music, the Kerrville Folk Festival quickly gained a reputation as a place to showcase original music by singer-songwriters. Kennedy wanted to offer an alternative to the smoke-filled nightclubs where music often becomes merely a backdrop for drinking and socializing. The festival provided a venue in which these musicians would be respected and enjoyed by an audience that is there to listen.

Rod and Nancy Lee Kennedy also came to the decision that the folk festival alone would not earn enough to cover their mortgage and bills. Consequently, the Kennedys hosted a variety of other events to help supplement their income, including a Ragtime Festival, Goodtime Music Festival, Country and Western Jubilee, Celebrity Golf Tournament, Gospel Jubilee, Classical Festival, Bluegrass Festival, and Wine and Music Festival (also known as "Little Folk"). Some of these events were successful, but the Kennedys continued to struggle with a variety of issues, not the least of which was inclement weather.

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<sup>63</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Rod Kennedy to Peter Yarrow, written 6 June 1974, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

### 1975: Rain, Rain, and More Rain

In April 1975, KERV radio started airing daily advertisements for the festival, scheduled to run from May 22 to 25. In addition, over one hundred National Public Radio stations across the nation began broadcasting recorded performances from the Kerrville Bluegrass and Country Music Festival.<sup>65</sup> Kennedy offered another open house on the ranch a few weeks before the festival in order to ease any last minute concerns from locals. Some changes had been made since the pervious year's festival. Ace Hindman, Joe Zammarron, Brian Urban, and a few others installed an altar on Chapel Hill just before the festival began.<sup>66</sup>

Another important development was the chartering of the Kerrville Music Foundation, Incorporated. This was specifically set up to benefit songwriters. Nancy Lee Kennedy was designated as president, Bill Dozier as vice president, Ed Wallace as secretary, and Rod Kennedy as treasurer.<sup>67</sup> This action formally made New Folk a foundation activity, and created a system to keep the competition fair by outlining the rules, screening process, and prizes. It also stated that the foundation would select three qualified touring and recording artists to judge the competition.<sup>68</sup> Peter Yarrow hosted the New Folk competition on Friday and Saturday afternoons, and Allen Damron, Carolyn Hester, and Mike Seeger served as judges.<sup>69</sup> There were twenty contestants each day competing for the six finalist slots, each of whom would perform a twenty-minute set on

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<sup>65</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 174.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.kyhote.com/kff/history.htm>, accessed 10 January 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 173.

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com/newfolk.htm>, Part One, accessed 10 January 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 175.

the main stage Sunday afternoon. The 1975 winners included Tom Russell, Shane and Kitty Appling, Patricia Hardin, Rick Dinsmore, Mark David McKinnon, and Bill Haymes.<sup>70</sup>

The Foundation members also agreed that, in honor of Kenneth Threadgill's popular yodeling performances from previous years, it would sponsor a National Yodeling Championship in hopes of revitalizing this dying tradition.<sup>71</sup> The Yodeling Championship was held on Friday, and Bill Staines from New Hampshire won first place.<sup>72</sup> Another popular attraction was the Townes Van Zandt Blues Workshop, which was held both Friday and Saturday. In order to accommodate nine performers each night, the evening concerts were scheduled to begin earlier than the previous year. Also, since the festival was continuing to gain national popularity, many out-of-state performers were added to the mainly Texas based lineup, including Montana Slim, Allen Fonteno and the Country Cajuns from New Orleans, Mike Seeger, Terry Waldo from Ohio, and the Bluegrass Revue from Oklahoma City.<sup>73</sup>

Because the city of Kerrville had temporarily moved the Arts and Crafts Fair to the Fourth of July Weekend, all daytime folk festival events that were normally held in town were moved to the ranch. Kennedy also decided to schedule the finals for the Texas Hot Air Balloon Races on Memorial Day hoping to bring more people to the area that

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<sup>70</sup> [www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009; this information conflicts with what is listed on the pdf discussing New Folk History on [www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com](http://www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com). Four of the names match up, but the pdf only lists five names. The fifth name is David Ruthstrom, but [www.happenstance-music.com](http://www.happenstance-music.com) does not include him and instead lists Patricia Hardin and Rick Dinsmore as winners. The list from [www.happenstance-music.com](http://www.happenstance-music.com) was complete; therefore I included the names from that list instead.

<sup>71</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 173.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>73</sup> 1975 Festival Program, Rod Kennedy Presents, Inc. Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

weekend.<sup>74</sup> This included a Memorial Day air show with San Antonio Stunt Pilot Cowell Haack and his famed Red, White, and Blue Pitts Specials, as well as two parachute demonstrations with professional jumpers Paul Ross and George McCullough of Adventure in Parachuting, Inc.<sup>75</sup>

Despite such elaborate plans, the 1975 festival would soon face serious challenges, most notably torrential rains which flooded the area. Quiet Valley Ranch itself received nine inches of rain, and many nearby bridges and roads were closed, limiting access to the festival.<sup>76</sup> Performers nicknamed the road next to the stage “River Road” because of the two inches of running water they had to cross with their equipment and gear in order to get to the stage.<sup>77</sup> Most of the concerts and activities were still able to continue in the rain, but the Hot Air Balloon Race was completely canceled. Kennedy had estimated that six thousand people would attend the 1975 festival, but only thirty-seven hundred braved the rain and storms. The result was a \$15,000 loss, according to business manager Kirby Lambert.<sup>78</sup>

Many performers were just as dedicated as the fans, who endured seemingly endless rain. In fact, while Darden Smith was on stage, the crew was forced to shut down the sound system for safety reasons, but that did not stop him from finishing the show. He jumped off the stage, ran with his guitar to the hospitality tent that was located in the

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<sup>74</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 174.

<sup>75</sup> 1975 Festival Brochure, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>76</sup> 1975 five page LP booklet and handwritten notes from Kennedy, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/13, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 176.

middle of the field, and finished his set singing to the remaining crowd of around six hundred from the top of a table.<sup>79</sup>

It was this feeling of dedication and togetherness that continued to grow among festival attendees. It soon became apparent that there was something special going on at the Quiet Valley Ranch that was generating positive publicity across the state. The rain issues created a way for campers and performers to pull together, to share food and supplies, and join in the creation of a unique and respectful atmosphere. It was also very common for musicians to mingle with the audience near the main stage area and to pick all night at various campfire jam sessions in the campground. Kathleen Hudson, a long-time festival-goer remembers the closeness she felt when she saw Townes Van Zandt performing in the campground for the children and Peter Yarrow singing “Puff the Magic Dragon” with Hudson’s own child in his lap.<sup>80</sup> These types of memorable experiences that festival attendees encountered from the beginning help build the strong sense of community that has continued to grow over the years.

In order to help make up for the losses of the 1975 Memorial Day weekend festival, Rod Kennedy staged a benefit concert and balloon race for June 14 and 15. Some regular performers, such as Bobby Bridger, Kenneth Threadgill, Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Bill Neeley, Plum Nelly, Peter Yarrow, Robert Shaw, Carol Cisneros, and others, signed on to play the two-day event, and ten balloonists agreed to return for the race. Tickets were \$5 and camping on the ranch was free.<sup>81</sup> This fundraiser helped eliminate

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<sup>79</sup> “Rod Kennedy Interview,” *Austin American Statesman*, May 23, 1996, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>80</sup> Kathleen Hudson, telephone interview with author, Kerrville, Texas, 29 January 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 177.

nearly fifty percent of the festival's earlier losses, and it also brought fans, performers, and volunteers closer together than ever.<sup>82</sup> According to Kennedy, this fundraiser was a turning point in the festival's history in which a "spiritual optimism" unified everyone's dedication to the festival, the music, and each other.<sup>83</sup> This "spiritual optimism" is a thriving force that keeps the festival alive and continuing yearly. An open letter from a festival-goer to Rod Kennedy in a local newspaper expressed what a special time those days at the ranch were, declaring that it had become "a lesson in love, sharing, and friendship," for all in attendance.<sup>84</sup>

Pedro Gutierrez recorded the 1975 two disc special edition LP, which the Kerrville Music Foundation non-profit soon released.<sup>85</sup> Even though the 1975 festival was plagued by rain, the record's sound quality was the best yet. Capturing forever the unique experiences of that year's festival, the album cover shows many happy attendees in rain gear enjoying the music in spite of the rain.

### **1976: Spiritual Optimism Despite Financial Losses**

The feeling of "spiritual optimism" shared by many during the 1975 festivals provided a large morale boost, as preparations began for the fifth anniversary year in 1976. In a note from Kennedy that addressed the future needs and developments of the festival and ranch, he mentioned the possible replacement of such festival motor vehicles

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<sup>82</sup> <http://www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com/newfolk.htm>, Part One, accessed 10 January 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 177.

<sup>84</sup> Pam Ellison, "Kerrville Folk Festival," *Rumors, Gossip, Lies, and Dreams*, June 1, 1978, 10, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical Files, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>85</sup> 1975 five page LP booklet and handwritten notes from Kennedy, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/13, C.A.H., U.T.

as the 1973 Dodge Maxi Van, which had been in almost constant use over the years. Also, he suggested that some trailers be traded in for more heavy-duty units. Lastly, he discussed a rather large project being researched by Bandera Electric Co-op, which would add 120 amp hookups for motor homes and trailers in the campground area.

In March, Rod and Nancylee Kennedy announced that they had officially relocated to Quiet Valley Ranch. Although Nancylee had already been living on the Ranch for the previous year and a half, Kennedy still traveled back and forth from Austin to Kerrville, often sleeping in his North Lamar offices. March marked the closing of the Austin offices, and the move to the country was complete.<sup>86</sup> To help maintain some continuity in staff operations, Ray Partain, the business manager and financial administrator from the Austin office, Staff Coordinator Sheila Spencer, Staff Supervisors Bob Long, Carol Porterfield, Nancy Ford, David Houston, Ace Hindman, and Les Chapman, Stage Manager Mac Partain, and head of Security Tractor Mike Goertz came to the ranch to lend a hand for the fifth anniversary of the festival.<sup>87</sup>

On May 15, Rod and Nancylee Kennedy hosted another bluegrass concert and open house at the ranch in preparation for the festival. Again, attendees could bring six bottles or cans from the side of Highway 16 or a \$1 donation. Also, the Kerr County Roadrunners Motorcycle Club led a rally to the ranch that helped boost attendance for the concert and camping.<sup>88</sup> This open house provided the staff an opportunity to test traffic control assignments and allowed the group to fine tune any issues before the festival began.

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<sup>86</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 181.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 184; 1976 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>88</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 184.

Kennedy dedicated the fifth anniversary festival to Peter Yarrow for his continual guidance, support, and dedication to the spirit of togetherness, which the festival represented. Yarrow, along with Allen Damron, Carolyn Hester, Kenneth Threadgill, Robert Shaw, and Bill and Bonnie Hearne, all agreed to perform for their fifth straight year. Other guests included David Amram, Gary P. Nunn, Patsy Montana, former New Folk winners David McKinnon and Bill Haymes, Mike Williams, Harmonica Frank, Steve Earle, St. Elmo's Fire, celebrity visitor Hondo Crouch (the legendary mayor of Luckenbach), and such national recording artists as Steven Fromholz, Milton Carroll, Guy Clark, and Ray Wylie Hubbard.<sup>89</sup>

1976 New Folk judges were David Amram, Charles John Quarto, and Gary P. Nunn. Winners included Danny Everett, John Garza, Michael Mathis, and Shug Mandlin.<sup>90</sup> The three New Folk judges and Lee Clayton instructed a songwriters workshop on Friday.<sup>91</sup> Patsy Montana, Dave McHenry, and Kenneth Threadgill judged the Yodeling Competition, crowning Kevin Hatcher the winner.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the action packed weekend, rain again plagued the festival. This caused attendance to fall to less than half of capacity, which created another financial loss. The other events that occurred at the ranch throughout the year brought further financial problems for the Kennedys. The Celebrity Golf Tournament, held over the summer, lost

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<sup>89</sup> <http://www.kerrvillefolkfestival.com/newfolk.htm>, Part One, accessed 10 January 2009; 1976 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>90</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 185; [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp). The information regarding judges listed on [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp) differs from what is noted in *Music from the Heart*. The information I mentioned in the text corresponds to what is in *Music from the Heart*.

<sup>91</sup> 1976 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>92</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 184.

\$20,000, and the C and W Jamboree lost \$41,000. Furthermore, a fire on their friend and helper Ace Hindman's ranch, where the Kennedys stored their most valuable possessions for safekeeping, destroyed everything.<sup>93</sup> By 1976, the Kennedys had spent every dollar they had, sold their house in Austin, sold their racing car collection, spent a portion of Nancy Lee's inheritance money, and took out several large loans. Now all their possessions were gone, and creditors would not stop calling. Rod Kennedy began to question whether he should continue. He wondered if selecting Kerrville, which was such a distance from any metropolitan area, was a primary reason for the failure? Should he just give up? Was this headache worth it in the long run? What was the purpose of continuing?

Despite all of these difficulties, festival-goers, staff, and musicians continued to remind Kennedy of just how important the festival was to their lives. Hundreds of supporters wrote letters expressing their love, support, and dedication for the Kennedys and their festival. Many letters also included cash donations. It was clear that hundreds of people had worked hard to make the first five years special and did not want to see it all come to an end. Kennedy was deeply moved by the show of support, but he also understood that he needed to devise a more effective financial plan in order to carry the festival through its sixth season.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 187, 190.

## CHAPTER III:

### THE MIDDLE YEARS

As the bills continued to mount from the devastating rains in 1975 and 1976, the festival's future remained uncertain. It seemed as if the festival could never catch a break. Despite the continuing financial hardships, festival-goers and musicians remained optimistic about the future of the festival. Singer Steven Fromholz told Rod Kennedy that if he did not have the festival, Fromholz "and his friends would lease a flat-bed trailer and throw the festival themselves."<sup>94</sup>

It is this type of commitment and dedication to the music and spirit of the festival that helped create a sense of community that has continued to flourish over the years. As the festival forged ahead despite financial troubles, the tightly-knit group of festival-goers created a unique community culture which they began to refer to as "Kerr-culture." For some, "Kerr-culture" is a way of life at the ranch. It embodies the character and traditions of the participants and places a distinctive mark on the festival's history and existence. This chapter will look at the festival's middle years and examine how the evolution of "Kerr-culture" is intertwined with the history and social dynamics of the Kerrville Folk Festival.

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<sup>94</sup> Kennedy, *Music From the Heart*, 191.

### The Quest for Sponsorships

After losing \$100,000 due to excessive rains during 1975 and 1976, Rod Kennedy realized he needed a new strategy in order to make the festival financially solvent.<sup>95</sup> He knew this would require further support from local businesses and individuals. As a way to provide extra cash flow, he created a sponsorship program that allowed local businesses to pay \$100 in exchange for a pair of tickets to the upcoming season. They would also receive thanks and recognition in the event programs.<sup>96</sup> As Kennedy said, “if Kerrville doesn’t want it, then I’m not going to do it anymore.”<sup>97</sup>

Kennedy sent out a letter to potential sponsors asking whether it would make a difference to them if the Kerrville Music Festivals ceased. He said, “we hate to ask that question, but we need your help, and without it, the future of the festival is really in question.”<sup>98</sup> Kennedy hoped to sell one hundred of these sponsorships in order to quickly raise \$10,000 and help pay off some delinquent bills. Kennedy soon began a determined campaign to go “door to door” throughout the Kerrville area soliciting sponsorships throughout the day and well into the night. As Kennedy recalls, “the only people that were up were people working at hamburger stands and restaurants or lying under a car at a gas station somewhere.”<sup>99</sup> Over the next four months, seventy businesses and individuals bought sponsorships, including gas stations, restaurants, motels, banks, bars,

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<sup>95</sup> 1978 Festival Press Release, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4 C.A.H., (U.T.).

<sup>96</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 191.

<sup>97</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Rod Kennedy to Potential Sponsors, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>99</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

construction companies, and antique stores.<sup>100</sup> The continued overwhelming support from friends, musicians, volunteers, and area businesses gave the staff at the Ranch a much needed morale boost and let them know their efforts were worthwhile.

While brainstorming other ideas that might garner support, Kennedy contemplated changing the name of the festival to the Texas Music Festival at Kerrville, which eliminated the term “folk” from the title. Steven Fromholz reminded Kennedy that by doing so, performers might expect more money, and crowds might expect more mainstream style performances. This, Fromholz argued, would ruin the fundamental values of the festival based on a mutual respect and appreciation of music from both the audience and performers.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, Kennedy decided against the name change.

In the end, the sponsorship campaign was a success. Kennedy was now convinced of the importance of the continuation of the festival. Kennedy thanked the festival’s many supporters in his 1980 newsletter. “Sponsors have nursed us through four very difficult years,” he said, “providing us with the means to survive, the time to catch up, and the conditions in which to flourish.”<sup>102</sup>

### **1977 – 1980: Recovering from Rain**

Tom Paxton, Bobby Bridger, and a few others made the suggestion to include a new event in 1977 that focused more on the idea of sharing songs free of competition. As Bridger mentioned, “New Folk was no longer peace, love, and granola.” Instead, it had

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<sup>100</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 191.

<sup>101</sup> Sean Mitchell, “A Pleasant Musical Sidetrip,” *The Dallas Times Herald*, May 30, 1977.

<sup>102</sup> 1980 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

turned into a “springboard for career-oriented artists.”<sup>103</sup> Kennedy set up an event as a trial for the 1977 festival on Friday afternoon at Chapel Hill. This allowed festival-goers the opportunity to take turns singing original songs in front of an audience. A few dozen people showed up to participate in this new gathering known as “Ballad Tree,” hosted by Tom Paxton.<sup>104</sup> Another new event, the Frisbee Frolic, took place after the New Folk competition on Friday. This brought “The ACES,” a professional Frisbee team from Chicago to Texas to exhibit their flying disc show.

Seven of the original thirteen artists returned to perform, and other new musicians included Marcia Ball, Delbert McClinton, Butch Hancock, Laura Lee McBride, Guy Clark, and Alvin Crow. In total, there were three-dozen main stage musicians that played the sixth annual festival. The New Folk Competition pleased many excited listeners on Saturday morning and afternoon. Rod Kennedy and Allen Damron co-hosted the event, which was judged by Bobby Bridger, Townes Van Zandt, and Steve Young.<sup>105</sup> Forty contestants traveled from Texas, New York, Wisconsin, Colorado, California, and Louisiana to participate. Winners included Jubal Clark, George Ensle, Tim Henderson, Eric Taylor, Shelley McIntyre, and Rick Beresford.<sup>106</sup>

Laura Lee McBride (the daughter of Tex Owens and former Bob Wills vocalist), Patsy Montana, and Kenneth Threadgill judged the Great American Yodel-Off, hosted by

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<sup>103</sup> *Hoka Hey*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1990, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical files, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>104</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 196. Chapel Hill is in the far corner of the property where the land rises, towards the back part of the meadow, and is around a quarter of a mile away from the main theater. It serves as a spiritual and special place on the ranch for many.

<sup>105</sup> “Memorial Day: Kerrville Festival’s Ready,” *Austin American Statesman*. Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14 C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>106</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 2 February 2009; This website lists the New Folk participants, winners, and judges since 1972. 1972-1976 is still being researched and is partially incomplete, but 1977 to current is a comprehensive list.

the Kerrville Music Foundation on Friday. During the competition, it rained so hard that staff and performers invited the audience on stage to watch under the covered roof.<sup>107</sup>

The Ken Brothers of La Grange beat the 1976 champion, Kevin Hatcher.<sup>108</sup>

Despite the rain, ticket, camping, food, and beverage sales increased by forty percent from 1976.<sup>109</sup> However, these improvements still did not earn back the confidence of local creditors, who were concerned about the festival's many delinquent bills.<sup>110</sup> In attempts to recover from the past few rainy years, Kennedy promptly set up a benefit show for September, entitled "8 Great Hours at Kerrville." Numerous Texas musicians with national recording contracts filled the lineup. Publicity for the event even appeared in *Billboard* magazine twice, thereby drawing national attention to the festival. At \$6 per person, ticket sales raised nearly to \$9,000, and helped alleviate some of the festival's debt.<sup>111</sup> The 1978 sponsorship collections were successful, and throughout the offseason, the office received many letters of gratitude. Also, to help save on costs, Kennedy decided to cut the festival budget by \$20,000.<sup>112</sup>

Although the festival continued to battle financial problems, Kennedy set the seventh annual festival for May 25-29, 1978.<sup>113</sup> The weather finally cooperated, and the

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<sup>107</sup> Bob Claypool, "Headin' for the Kerrville Folk Festival if the Good Lord's Willin' and the Creeks Don't Rise," *Houston Post*, May 20, 1977.

<sup>108</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 195.

<sup>109</sup> 1978 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Rod Kennedy to Peter Yarrow, 13 December 1977, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>111</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 200-201.

<sup>112</sup> 1978 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>113</sup> 1978 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.; in 1978 the festival became identified with the red tailed hawk due to all the hawks seen on the Ranch and in the area.

festival was a big success. The number of campers doubled from 900 to 1800, with a weekend total of 6,800 people.<sup>114</sup> These strong numbers allowed the Kennedys to finally make a profit.

Due to the success of the trial Ballad Tree in 1977, an extended version of the song sharing session was held in 1978.<sup>115</sup> Again, festival-goers enjoyed the sessions, because all levels of musicians had the opportunity to participate and share new and original songs with an appreciative and attentive audience.

It had also become apparent that the New Folk Competition provided a platform for singer-songwriting talents to gain notice at a national level. Judges Steven Fromholz, Gary P. Nunn, and Don Sanders selected Vince Bell, Lindsay Haisley, Jessica Bryan, Pettigrew and Blanchard, Steve Sajich, and Louis Real as winners. Other finalists who went on to become nationally known stars later in their careers, include Nanci Griffith and Steve Earle, both of whom are now considered two of the state's most prominent singer-songwriters.<sup>116</sup>

A weekend low-point was the annual Yodeling Competition. Only two competitors showed up for the event judged by Kenneth Threadgill, Allen Damron, and Kevin Hatcher.<sup>117</sup> After the competition, Kenneth Threadgill and Bill Neeley entertained

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The hawk image was sketched by Wes Speir and screened to the back of the festival t-shirts. It is currently still a symbol and trademark of the festival.

<sup>114</sup> Monica Maeckle, "Kerrville Folk Festival," "Images," *Austin American Statesman*, pg. 14-17, June 5, 1978, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.; Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 207.

<sup>115</sup> 1978 Festival Brochure; Letter from Rod Kennedy to Tom Paxton, 13 December 1977; Letter from Rod Kennedy to David Amram, 26 December 1977, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.; Kennedy confirmed Paxton and Amram's participation as host of Ballad Tree. This agreement earned them \$50 in addition to their main stage performers fee of \$100, roundtrip airfare, and a hotel room.

<sup>116</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 2 February 2009.

<sup>117</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 204.

the audience with a special set to help fill up the extra time. Main stage performers included David Amram, Tom Paxton, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Dan McCrimmon, Rusty Weir, Delbert McClinton, a Frummox reunion (Dan McCrimmon and Steven Fromholz), and the return of Peter Yarrow. The success of this festival provided another morale booster and reminded everyone of the importance of their efforts and monetary donations.

Kerrville continued to create a name for itself throughout the music world. International press coverage from Germany and Japan, and an eight-page festival write up in “Scene Magazine,” a section of the *Dallas Morning News*, testified to the festival’s growing popularity.<sup>118</sup> Many radio stations, newspapers, and magazines covered the festival, emphasizing its bumpy road to success. In addition, such local journalists as Townsend Miller and Bob Claypool wrote a number of very positive articles about the festival’s great music and family-friendly atmosphere. Kennedy also sent out thousands of brochures, posters, and newsletters, and he relied on word of mouth from festival-goers to help publicize the event.<sup>119</sup>

Due to this increasing interest in the festival, Rod Kennedy and Director Allen Damron decided to extend the festival to five days for the eighth year. Another change for 1979 included the addition of a Great Harmonica Blow-Off, which replaced the Yodeling competition.<sup>120</sup> A special moment at this festival included Kennedy’s introduction of Bobby Bridger’s song, “Heal in the Wisdom,” which became the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 206, 209.

<sup>119</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Townsend Miller, “Folk Festival Fans Enthusiastic,” *Austin American Statesman*, May 31, 1979, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

festival's new anthem.<sup>121</sup> The song actually commemorated two of Bridger's friends, who had recently died, but the tune quickly became a theme song around which festival-goers rallied to celebrate the spirit of community that had developed at the festival. "Heal in the Wisdom" is still sung at the close of the festival each year.

One of Bridger's friends who inspired the song was festival volunteer staff member "Antler Dave" who passed away in a tragic car accident. Antler Dave, or David Eldon Leowen, led the original sanitation crew but is better known for helping to establish the campfire tradition that makes the Kerrville camping experience and "Kerr-culture" so unique. Every year, Antler Dave brought furniture and other camping accessories in order to set up a picking lounge for musicians. Located under a large live oak tree, later named "The Energy Tree," his campsite became the oldest recurring campfire jam session.<sup>122</sup> At the eighth annual festival, the Antler Dave Memorial Run, led by Gary P. Nunn and Bobby Bridger, honored Leowen's legacy.<sup>123</sup>

During the 1978 festival, it also became apparent that the New Folk competition was gaining popularity, 120 performers submitted tapes for review.<sup>124</sup> Two of the six winners, Tish Hinojosa and John Ims, went on to gain national acclaim and successful recording careers.<sup>125</sup> Main stage artists included Peter Rowan, Jim Ritchie, Don Sanders, Marcia Ball, Jimmy Driftwood, and many festival regulars, such as David Amram, Tom

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<sup>121</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 210; May 25, 1979, marks the commencement date for "Heal in the Wisdom" as the official festival anthem. It was originally written for Michael Eakin, the co-creator of the *Austin Sun* who was murdered in Houston, and Antler Dave, a festival "family member."

<sup>122</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 151-53.

<sup>123</sup> 1981 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; for \$1 entry fee, attendees participated in a fun run around the ranch that began at the large live oak tree mentioned above.

<sup>124</sup> Miller, "Folk Festival Fans Enthusiastic," Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>125</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

Paxton, Carolyn Hester, Gary P. Nunn, Steven Fromholz, and B.W. Stevenson.<sup>126</sup> Light rain late Sunday and Monday evenings did not hamper attendance, which reached over 10,000 attendees for the weekend.<sup>127</sup>

The festival enjoyed a successful year, but it still required another benefit concert, “12 Great Hours at Kerrville” in order to pay off its debts. Two days after the benefit, a small group of staff and musicians hit the road for the first “Kerrville on the Road Tour,” which helped build relations and attract attention across the state.<sup>128</sup> They both proved successful, and by the end of the 1979 season, organizers had paid off \$47,000 of the festival’s total debts.<sup>129</sup>

The ninth year, dubbed “5 Great Days in May,” turned out to be the largest festival yet. The attendance reached 13,000 for the five-day weekend and made a profit for the fourth year in a row.<sup>130</sup> Local and national sponsorships for the festival brought in around \$17,000, and advance ticket sales doubled from 1979. This early income helped assure the festival’s success in 1980.<sup>131</sup>

In years past, camping during the festival was free with the purchase of a single day ticket. In 1980, Kennedy decided to require festival-goers to purchase at least three days of tickets in order to camp at the ranch. This was an attempt to avoid overcrowding

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<sup>126</sup> 1979 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>127</sup> Miller, “Folk Festival Fans Enthusiastic,” Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/14, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>128</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 216.

<sup>129</sup> Ellison, *Rumors, Gossip, Lies, and Dreams*, pg 10-11, 16-17, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>130</sup> McCourkle, “The Impresario of Folk,” pg 70-86, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>131</sup> Randy Salzman, “Success Raining on Kennedy,” *Kerrville Daily Times*, May 21, 1980.

in the campgrounds. This change did not seem to bother festival attendees, as 400 five-day passes with camping sold before Kennedy even announced that year's musical lineup.<sup>132</sup>

David Pipes and Naomi Shihab Nye hosted a new addition to the ninth annual festival, a children's hour-long event called the "Singing Circus." The circus events entertained around 100 children under a tent at the campgrounds. The event created a nice supplement to the day and encouraged the creativity and imagination of the younger crowds.<sup>133</sup> This year's New Folk competition highlighted 40 out of the 113 up-and-coming artists and their original songs.<sup>134</sup> One contestant in particular, Lyle Lovett, did not win, but went on to have a very successful recording and performing career.

Kennedy dedicated the ninth festival to barrel house piano player Robert Shaw, who had performed at every festival since 1972.<sup>135</sup> Shaw also hosted a "Blues for Robert" event that featured John Vandiver, Lucinda Williams, and Spider John Koener.<sup>136</sup> Ballad Tree sessions continued to gain support from fans as a festival favorite, because they embodied the sharing and togetherness for which many believed the festival stood. Main stage musician appearances included 1979 New Folk winner Tish Hinojosa, 1979 New Folk participant Nanci Griffith, along with Lucinda Williams, Uncle Walt's Band, B.W. Stevenson, Guy Clark, Willis Alan Ramsey, and many more.

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<sup>132</sup> 1980 Festival Press Release, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid; the total cost to put on the "Singing Circus" was \$1,700. Rock Ridgeway designed the tent. David Pipes was the Circus Director.

<sup>134</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>135</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 219.

<sup>136</sup> 1980 Festival Press Release, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

After the main stage performances, many artists made their way to the campgrounds to play and sing until sunrise. Having the opportunity to play with, talk to, learn from, and share ideas with well-trained and seasoned musicians provided very special memories for many campers and young musicians. It is unique experiences such as these that set the Kerrville Folk Festival apart from other festivals. As Bobby Bridger mentioned, “it is one of the few festivals where musicians and audience become one.”<sup>137</sup>

The Ooze Brothers provided entertainment for many campers in 1980. Mongo and Lloyd, “professional partiers,” made a name for themselves by going around to random campsites to perform outrageous jokes and routines dressed in formal tuxedos from the waist up and cut-offs from the waist down.<sup>138</sup> Special moments and memories like this helped to develop the unique ambiance and “Kerr-culture” found at the festival.

Despite these successes, Kennedy became so hard pressed for cash that he could not always pay the performers.<sup>139</sup> To help make ends meet, Kennedy set up another “12 Great Hours.” Additional help came when the “Kerrville on the Road” publicity tour received a \$7,500 grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts, which provided much needed support.<sup>140</sup>

In spite of all of the financial woes, the festival continued to enjoy increased media coverage across the state, country, and around the world. A few media standouts include broadcasting five of the last six festivals on National Public Radio (NPR), having a section about the festival listed in the *International Guide to Music Festivals*, and

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<sup>137</sup> McCourkle, “The Impresario of Folk,” pg 70-86, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>138</sup> Tim Lyons, “Kerrville Folk Festival,” *The Daily Texan*, June 5, 1980.

<sup>139</sup> Pete Oppel, “Kerrville Folk Stuck in Financial Valley,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 29, 1980.

<sup>140</sup> 1980 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

appearing in a five-page festival spread in one of Japan’s largest country music weekly magazines.<sup>141</sup> Also, a House Concurrent Resolution from the Texas Legislature honored the festival’s tenth anniversary. This resolution commended the festival for providing “more than one hundred thousand music lovers from Texas, forty other states, and ten foreign countries the opportunity to attend family-oriented concerts that featured more than a thousand professional musicians and emerging songwriters over the past ten years.”<sup>142</sup> All of these examples underscore the remarkable degree of worldwide publicity the festival had received.

### **1981 – 1986: A Growing “Kerr-Culture”**

As plans began for the tenth anniversary festival, Kennedy contemplated various options for commemorating the festival’s first ten years. Due to the large turnout in 1980, Kennedy decided to extend the festival to two weekends. He mentioned that the grounds at the ranch were designed to handle around 4,800 people comfortably. Extending the length of the festival would allow organizers to accommodate the growing number of attendees without sacrificing the “organic” nature of the event.

Kennedy also noticed that the main stage theater needed to be expanded for a variety of safety and performance reasons. He asked his neighbor and good friend, Ace Hindman, to help tear down the old theater.<sup>143</sup> The new stage increased the performance

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> House Concurrent Resolution, No. 140, April 14, 1981, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>143</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009; Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 122; Ace Hindman also helped with many other building projects on the Ranch when the Kennedy’s originally moved in. On this project, Fred Urban, Rocky Pederson, OK Dave Conley, and a crew of volunteers helped to build the new stage.

area, which accommodated more performers and members of the press.<sup>144</sup> A concrete slab replaced the old wooden floors. To help improve acoustics, workers installed a cantilevered roof.<sup>145</sup> The festival received two steel beams as a donation to use as cross beams for the roof, and volunteers picked up rocks around the ranch to use in the stage foundation.<sup>146</sup>

Because the festival now encompassed two weekends, the middle part of the week needed to include events to entertain those who camped the full eleven days. Kennedy decided to add a Songwriting School, which featured well-established musicians as faculty. The school benefited both songwriters and short story writers by incorporating analysis, critiques, performances, reviews, games, lectures, writing labs, and the opportunity to hear personal songwriting experiences told by faculty members.<sup>147</sup>

Kennedy also set up a “Newport Remembered” concert as a tribute to the influence the Newport Folk Festival had on the evolution of the Kerrville Folk Festival. Peter Yarrow discussed personal stories and provided insight into the role he played in the creation and existence of the Newport Festival. Concert highlights included appearances from Kerrville favorites and Newport alumnae Allen Damron, Carolyn Hester, Kenneth Threadgill, Jimmy Driftwood, Bob Gibson, Odetta, and Peter Yarrow.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> 1980 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>145</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 226.

<sup>146</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 123-124; to help save money, the crew decided to paint empty one-gallon coffee cans black to use as barrel lights for the stage.

<sup>147</sup> 1983 Kerrville Music Foundation, Inc. Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1 C.A.H., U.T.; there was a \$100 fee to attend, which included the three-day school, free camping, a free catfish dinner on Wednesday, and a celebration concert that evening.

<sup>148</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 231.

Peter Yarrow extended the length of his stay at the festival, and was seen singing and socializing around the campfires, along with his daughter Bethany. Kathleen Hudson, a long-time festival attendee who grew up idolizing Yarrow, remembers the surreal feeling of watching her children play with Bethany and sing songs with Yarrow around the campfire.<sup>149</sup>

Other changes for the tenth anniversary included moving the New Folk Competition to the ranch, which allowed Kennedy to have full control and supervision of all festival events.<sup>150</sup> Allen Damron and Kennedy co-hosted 40 of the 170 musicians who entered the contest.<sup>151</sup> Musical highlights from both weekends included evening performances from Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Nanci Griffith, Cypress Swamp Stompers, Mariachi Infantile Guadalupano, Townes Van Zandt, Allen Ross, Shake Russell, Rusty Weir, Uncle Walt’s Band, John Vandiver, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Peter Rowan, Bill Neeley, Eliza Gilkyson, and Gary P. Nunn. This lineup demonstrated the diverse number of musical genres represented at the festival.<sup>152</sup> To top off the Saturday evening performance, Allen Damron and Gayle Ross presented Rod and Nancy Lee Kennedy with a donation of \$946. Staff and performers collected this gift to show their gratitude for the Kennedy’s continued efforts to create an inspirational experience for musicians and participants alike.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Kathleen Hudson, Telephone interview with author, Kerrville, 29 January 2009.

<sup>150</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 230.

<sup>151</sup> [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>152</sup> 1981 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>153</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 232.

Unfortunately, rain plagued the festival seven times throughout the eleven-day event, leaving organizers \$32,000 short of the anticipated budget.<sup>154</sup> The attendance for both weekends dropped considerably from 1980. In an attempt to make up for this shortfall, Kennedy set up the “Kerrville Tears of Joy Reunion” and another “12 Great Hours” to help cover unpaid bills.<sup>155</sup>

The eleventh annual festival took place May 27 through June 6, and included such festival regulars as Bob Livingston, Townes Van Zandt, Rick Beresford, Odetta, Gatemouth Brown, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Melissa Javors, Rusty Weir, Frummox, Carolyn Hester, and John Vandiver.<sup>156</sup> Due to the success of Bob Gibson’s Songwriting School, Kennedy scheduled it for a second year.

In order to include more variety, Kennedy also added a few new events to supplement the regular festival activities. Chicago Old Towne School’s Executive Director Ray Tate helped create a Guitar School during the weekdays. The school offered instruction on a variety of techniques and included demonstrations by faculty.<sup>157</sup> Kennedy also offered an “Earth School,” which focused on nutrition, herbology, yoga, and physical wellness.<sup>158</sup> In addition, Kennedy held a panel to discuss the music business. Steven Fromholz also suggested holding a staff concert on the final weekend. This

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<sup>154</sup> 1981 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1 C.A.H., U.T.; some of Kennedy’s debt included owing many performers their concert fee for playing, \$4,000 in motel costs, \$3,500 to electricians who wired the facility, \$1,100 to lumber companies for wood for the new stage, etc...

<sup>155</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 231-232, 234-235; despite the rains, the festival attendance for eight days reached a new high totaling 14,600 attendees.

<sup>156</sup> 1982 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>157</sup> 1983 Kerrville Music Foundation, Inc. Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1 C.A.H., U.T.; the school had room for forty students to attend. The cost was \$75 if paid before May 10, and \$85 afterwards.

<sup>158</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 245; 1982 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

allowed volunteers the opportunity to be chosen by their peers to perform on stage.<sup>159</sup> The weather cooperated and 5,000 more festival-goers attended than the previous year.<sup>160</sup> Despite the high attendance, the festival still owed \$135,000, so organizers decided to raise the 1983 sponsorship fees to \$150.<sup>161</sup>

In order to accommodate the growing festival attendance, which now included thousands of fans from more than forty states and a dozen foreign countries, Kennedy spent the off season relocating the fence line in order to create a larger camping area.<sup>162</sup> As festival preparations continued, Kennedy scheduled more than 100 artists for the extended eleven-day event, which took place May 26 through June 5, 1983.<sup>163</sup> Twenty-eight of the festival's alumni now boasted national recording contracts, underscoring the festival's important role in helping performers achieve prominence.<sup>164</sup> England's *London Country Music World* magazine declared the Kerrville Folk Festival to be "the best music festival in the world."<sup>165</sup>

Kennedy soon added a storyteller's workshop, a "Salute to Canada," and a six-mile run sponsored by *Running Through Texas* magazine.<sup>166</sup> The "Salute to Canada"

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<sup>159</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 246.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> 1983 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>162</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 256; 1983 Festival Press Release, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>163</sup> "Music Festival Begins Season with Something for Everyone," *Ingram News*, January 27, 1983, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>164</sup> Carol Bonner Lane, "Music Fills the Quiet Valley," *Texas Highways*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (May 1982): 18-22, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>165</sup> 1983 Thank You Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/1, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>166</sup> 1983 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

brought Stan Rogers, Connie Kaldor, and Al “One-Man Band” Simmons to the Ranch to conduct workshops and provide information about Canadian music.<sup>167</sup> Stan Rogers became popular not only on the stage, but also around the campfires. He was seen up at all hours of the night jamming at various sites across the ranch.

Tragically, Rogers’s Air Canada Flight caught fire, killing him and other passengers. Staff at the ranch moved the Canadian flag on stage to half-mast and passed out maple leaf pins in his honor. Volunteers also collected donations to plant a maple tree on the ranch in his memory. Despite the solemn feeling, festival-goers honored his legacy by remembering his great spirit and the good times they spent with him.<sup>168</sup>

As preparations for the 1984 season began, it became evident that this year’s festival might be the biggest yet. Kennedy hoped to capitalize on the larger flow of traffic from tourists who crossed the country on their way to attend the World’s Fair in New Orleans, and the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.<sup>169</sup> During the off-season, volunteers worked on a few ranch maintenance projects. They added a permanent roof to the hospitality shelter, put in a new water system tank, and created a new food stand window.

Many regular performers returned to the 1984 festival, held May 24 through June 3, including Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Peter Yarrow, Bobby Bridger, Townes Van Zandt, Carolyn Hester, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Gilmore, Bill Staines, Nanci Griffith, and Odetta. The festival, which focused originally on Texas songwriters,

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> John T. Davis, “Kerrville Music Fitting Tribute for Rogers,” *Austin American Statesman*, May 11, 1983, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>169</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 267.

now included a number of acts from across the country. Overall, the 1984 festival went well and also made a profit.<sup>170</sup>

1984 also marked the second Fajita Thursday, a new campground tradition. This idea came from professional chefs Brian and Steve Smith's attempt in 1982 to create their own outdoor kitchen that served meals for up to twelve hundred people. Rod Kennedy, however, shut down their operation, because it began cutting into concession profits.<sup>171</sup>

Following the lead of the Smith brothers, Javier Cortez, a "Kerr-vert" who has attended every festival, decided to create his own feast and party. The first Thursday after Memorial Day has no main stage concerts, making it the perfect day to hold Fajita Thursday without competing with festival sales. He normally gathers a team of helpers and volunteers to cut, chop, mix, marinate, and cook the hundred pounds of meat and vegetables.<sup>172</sup> This event soon became a festival tradition and unique part of the "Kerr-culture" that festival-goers look forward to every year.

Another example of this growing "Kerr-culture" is the completion of the first Kerrictionary in 1985. This special dictionary included over 120 words formed from the root word "Kerr."<sup>173</sup> Festival-goers hoped it would serve as a reference to newcomers unfamiliar with the language that had evolved there over the years. A few examples include kerr-virgin (a first-time festival-goer), kerr-vert (those who have seen the light

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>171</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 262-263; in 1982, the Smith Brothers brought in sun-baked adobe bricks to make their own *hornos* for their campsite kitchen. *Hornos* are southwestern style bread ovens.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> The Kerrictionary lists terms as all one word with the base word "kerr" all capitalized, without a hyphen (ie. KERRvert). However, many "Kerr-verts" write out "Kerr" terms with a hyphen. I have chosen to use a hyphen in my descriptions. Also, the Kerrictionary lists the term "kerr-virgin" as "KERRgin." I chose to use "kerr-virgin" because that is the term most commonly used by "Kerr-verts."

and passed through the semi-mystical experience of kerr-version), and kerr-leader (person responsible for insuring the smooth operation of a specific area of festival operations).<sup>174</sup> This language is a unique aspect of the “Kerr-culture” on the ranch and continues to grow every year.

The fourteenth annual festival took place May 27 to June 3, 1985, and included several new acts, such as the Austin Lounge Lizards, Kate Wolf, Tom Paxton, Bob Gibson, and Anne Hills performing as “Just Friends,” the Amram Jam, Marcia Ball, and Billy Joe Shaver.<sup>175</sup> The festival also featured the legendary folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary. In an attempt to further increase the festival’s marketing efforts, Kennedy hired Kathleen Hudson as the Foundation’s Development Director.<sup>176</sup> He hoped she would be able to help promote and increase fundraising efforts. The festival also gained its first corporate sponsor, *Texas Monthly*, a magazine that chronicles life in contemporary Texas.<sup>177</sup>

The additional attention and publicity appeared to work. The first Saturday brought 5,000 attendees and another 6,000 came the following Saturday to hear Peter, Paul, and Mary. This broke previous attendance records.<sup>178</sup> In addition to record-breaking

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<sup>174</sup> Kerrictionary, Vol. II, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/12, C.A.H., U.T.; Sue Medley and a group of volunteers assembled Volume 1.

<sup>175</sup> 1985 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; two noteworthy new folk finalists participated that went on to gain national acclaim for their songwriting abilities was David Roth and Hal Ketchum.

<sup>176</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 274; Kathleen Hudson, Telephone interview with author, Kerrville, 29 January 2009.

<sup>177</sup> *Texas Monthly* reports on issues such as politics, the environment, industry, and leisure activities such as travel, food, museum, and cultural events.

<sup>178</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 277, 279.

attendance, the festival office received hundreds of notes from festival-goers expressing their delight with the event.<sup>179</sup>

1986 was another big year for the festival, in terms of increasing exposure. Not only was the festival celebrating its fifteenth anniversary, but across the state, Texans were commemorating Sesquicentennial festivities in remembrance of 150 years of statehood. In 1986, the annual festival publicity tour became a part of this larger state celebration when organizers designated it as “The Official Goodwill Tour of the Texas Sesquicentennial.” The publicity tour played in thirteen states, and the Folk Festival itself was included as one of the thousand official events.<sup>180</sup>

In order to get ready for the upcoming anniversary celebrations, Kennedy brought a dismantled stage from Austin to the ranch. Lee Green and his crew reassembled the stage to serve as an enlarged campground theater area to hold children’s concerts and other smaller events.<sup>181</sup> Large crowds turned out for the first weekend of the fifteenth anniversary festival. The anniversary Catfish Fry and concert offered a preview for the upcoming Sesquicentennial Tour and gave Kennedy time to publicly recognize all those who helped to make the festival so special over the previous fifteen years. An Anniversary Ball at the YO Hilton Hotel in Kerrville followed the celebration.<sup>182</sup> A few

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<sup>179</sup> There are numerous folders filled with letters of support, appreciation, and thanks all throughout the Rod Kennedy Presents, Inc. Collection, Center for American History, and University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>180</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 280; the Texas Sesquicentennial celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Texas.

<sup>181</sup> Ken Schmidt, “Music and Nature: Threadgill Theater Provides Intimate Setting for Music,” *Kerrville Daily Times*, June 11, 1996, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>182</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 289; 1986 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; Beto y Los Fairlanes played at the Anniversary Ball and Concert at the YO Hilton Hotel.

festival main stage newcomers in 1986 included Darden Smith, Richard Dobson, Shawn Phillips, Katy Moffat, Eric Anderson, and Angela Strehli.<sup>183</sup>

The second weekend brought four days of rain, which cut attendance by over 5,000. By the end of the 1986 season, rain at all events contributed to a \$10,000 loss for the year. It became evident that more financial help and larger were necessary for the festival to continue.<sup>184</sup> Due to increasing expenses, the cost to hold the festival had grown from \$7,000 in 1972, to \$100,000 in 1986.<sup>185</sup> Luckily, Southwest Airlines agreed to become the “official airline” of the Festival.<sup>186</sup> This helped reduce travel costs for performers and allowed flexibility to budget for emergency problems.<sup>187</sup>

### **1987 – 1989: Folk Aid Helps Save the Festival**

Major repairs to the ranch were a necessity after the flooding rains throughout the 1986 season. Kennedy set up a series of work weekends in the spring for volunteer carpenters and painters to help with various projects.<sup>188</sup> Despite the continually mounting financial issues, Kennedy decided to extend the festival to eighteen days in order to maintain the ambiance everyone had grown accustomed to. In order to make this change successful, he sent an emergency newsletter out to renew early sponsorships. Other ways

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<sup>183</sup> 1986 Anniversary Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/2, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>184</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 289, 294, 296.

<sup>185</sup> 1986 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/2, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>186</sup> 1987 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/2, C.A.H., U.T.; *Texas Monthly* also renewed their sponsorship.

<sup>187</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 289-294.

<sup>188</sup> 1987 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/2, C.A.H., U.T.

to contribute included \$25 Friends of the Kerrville Folk Festival memberships, pairs of lifetime tickets for \$500, and buying advertisement space in the festival programs.<sup>189</sup>

The 1987 festival ran from May 21 to June 7, and included the usual weekday and weekend set of events, such as the New Folk Competition, multiple Ballad Tree sessions, Folk Mass, Children's Concerts, music schools, sundown concerts, and the now legendary campfire jam sessions.<sup>190</sup>

Over the years, the campfire jam sessions have become one of the trademarks of the Kerrville Folk Festival and the real heart of the "Kerr-culture" at the ranch. However, it was not until after 1986 that Kerrville's campfire music gained world attention. All throughout the day and night, festival-goers sit around their campfires or wander from campsite to campsite taking turns playing songs and swapping stories. Each campfire is unique and might play a different style of music or include a wide variety of instruments. The most common instrument is the guitar, but others include fiddles, banjos, accordions, flutes, saxophones, clarinets, mandolins, and even larger instruments, such as tubas, upright basses, and pianos.

Over the years, different campfires have taken on somewhat of a unique "personality." As Dyanne Fry Cortez mentions, "you can't plan a Kerrville campfire. But there are steps you can take to encourage one." Some of these steps include building a campfire with a sitting area, offering free food and drinks, or hoping that the music itself entices others to join in. As mentioned before, Antler Dave's campfire, later known as

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<sup>189</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 294, 296.

<sup>190</sup> 1987 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; the Children's Circus was directed by storyteller Gayle Ross, and included performances by Peter Alsop, Don Sanders, Melissa Javors, and Kim Wallach. The Children's stage was covered for this festival and a sunshade area was built over the audience area.

Energy, is one of the first well-known camping areas. He had all the ingredients for a successful jam session, including overstuffed furniture, food and coffee, and fabulous musicians. Some of the better-known artists who played there include Peter Yarrow, B.W. Stevenson, David Amram, Steve Gillette, and Townes Van Zandt.<sup>191</sup>

One of the more memorable campfire events occurred in 1986, when British record producer Pete Lawrence captured a young festival volunteer, Michelle Shocked, on his Walkman singing and playing around the campfire. He produced *The Texas Campfire Tapes*, which made her an overnight success in Europe and brought worldwide attention to the impromptu jam sessions at the Kerrville Folk Festival.<sup>192</sup> Soon, a number of musicians were hoping to be discovered in the same manner. By 1987, many regular “Kerr-verts” noticed a flood of “Kerr-virgin” songwriters wandering about the campgrounds hoping to land a recording contract.

Highlights of the 1987 festival included main stage performances from Darden Smith, David Amram, Jon Ims, Ponty Bone, Caribbean Steeltones, Allen Damron, Steve Gillette, and Lindsay Haisley. During the second week of the festival, a concert and lecture series covered a one hundred year history of American popular music.<sup>193</sup> On the third weekend, festival-goers celebrated the renaming and dedication of the newly rebuilt campground theater the, Threadgill Memorial Theater.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 96.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>193</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 296; 1987 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; Kay Sparks, Saul Broudy, John Pearse, Mary Faith Rhodes, and others helped Hugh Sparks with the lecture series and concerts.

<sup>194</sup> Schmidt, “Music and Nature,” *Kerrville Daily Times*, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

Despite the high spirits of those in attendance, the festival suffered another devastating fourteen days of rain. The rain was so severe a creek formed in the main theater area. Turtle Creek, which crosses Highway 16 by the ranch, rose three feet over the road making it impossible to leave.<sup>195</sup> The ranch received a total of thirteen and a half inches of rain, causing the festival to fall \$29,000 further in debt. Coupled with a thirty-five percent drop in attendance from 1986, the total deficit for the 1987 season reached \$60,000.<sup>196</sup> Discussions began immediately on ways to make up for these losses.

Following the lead of Willie Nelson's Farm Aid benefit concerts, which helped raise money and awareness for family farms across the United States, Kennedy organized his own series of "Folk Aid" benefit concerts. In addition, supporters across the country and Canada began hosting events to support the festival.<sup>197</sup> Organizers also created a forty-member "Committee to Bail Out the Kerrville Folk Festival," which included political figures, festival performers and supporters, and media members hoping to raise money to keep the festival operating.<sup>198</sup>

The Folk Aid benefits in the fall and spring went well, and reduced the debt from \$60,000 to \$22,000. This provided enough to continue for another season.<sup>199</sup> By gradually drawing attention to the festival through fundraising efforts, the Kennedys also

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<sup>195</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 200-201.; Sudden Creek is a sunken area at the back end of the meadow where run off water flows when it rains a substantial amount. The usually dry bed runs through the oak grove and wraps around the northeast side of the hill. Many have arrived back to their campsites to find that their tents and belongings are submerged in water.

<sup>196</sup> L.E. McCullough, "Music Soothes Festival Woes," *Austin American Statesman*, December 18, 1987.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> 1987 Folk Aid Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/2, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>199</sup> 1988 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/13, C.A.H., U.T.

managed to gain Budweiser and Coca Cola as sponsors for 1988.<sup>200</sup> Despite the grave outlook after the rains of 1987, festival organizers called it “a miracle” that the festival survived on for its seventeenth year.<sup>201</sup>

Continuing the eighteen-day festival pattern for the second year, many artists who had been on waiting lists finally got the opportunity to play on the main stage. Opening weekend of the festival included performances from numerous New Folk winners and participants, such as Buddy Mondlock, David Roth, Darden Smith, Robert Earl Keen, Jr., and Chuck Pyle, as well as such festival favorites as Carolyn Hester, Peter Yarrow, David Amram, Bobby Bridger, and Bill and Bonnie Hearne.<sup>202</sup> The usual events filled the weekend and weekdays, and Tuesday’s Sundown concert and barbeque celebrated Peter Yarrow’s fiftieth birthday.<sup>203</sup>

During the second weekend, the West Virginia public radio show “Mountain Stage” recorded two shows. Performers included Bob Gibson, Eliza Gilkyson, Twister Sisters, Gayle Ross, Eric Kitchen, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Michelle Shocked, Uncle Bonsaw, David Halley, and the Mountain Stage Band. This provided great exposure for the festival and also allowed people across the country a chance to hear great singer-songwriters. The third weekend’s evening concerts included acts such as Beto y Los Fairlanes, Odetta, Steve Earle, Connie Kaldor, Hal Michael Ketchum, and Sukay, an act

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<sup>200</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 305.

<sup>201</sup> 1988 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid; [http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 9 March 2009.

<sup>203</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 308.

from Peru.<sup>204</sup> Overall, the festival welcomed 102 artists to the stage over the eighteen-day period.

During the off-season, Kennedy received a thirty-two page “Transatlantic Tribute to the Kerrville Folk Festival, Volume I” by Arthur Wood from England. It included interviews, comments, photos, and reviews from the festival. This publication circulated throughout Europe, including England, Finland, and Norway, and is just one example of the growing international attention garnered by the festival.<sup>205</sup>

The festival also continued to gain attention in a variety of news outlets throughout the United States. A *Playboy* magazine article described the festival as, “attended by the best songwriters in the world,” and advised readers to “go to Texas to hear this amalgam of rock, country, and folk music with the kind of lyrics that make you shiver.” Joe Nick Patoski referenced the festival in a twenty-page editorial about Texas music in *Texas Monthly*. Patoski says the “folk and country extravaganza” is a “wholesome family affair that has replaced Newport as the best annual open air music festival in America.”<sup>206</sup> The acclaimed *Book on Texas Bests* noted Kerrville as the “best folk festival.”<sup>207</sup> Even such record industry notables as Roger Sovine, Vice President of BMI Nashville, stated in *Billboard*, “The Kerrville Folk Festival is the most important songwriting event in America today.” He further proclaimed that the festival “has provided a fertile and creative environment that has aided singer-songwriters, and is an

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<sup>204</sup> 1988 Festival Brochure, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/3, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>205</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 311.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 314.

<sup>207</sup> Wini Jones, “Texas Bests’ Book Credits Kerr County with a Few,” *Kerrville Daily Times*, October 2, 1988, Kennedy Collection, Box #2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

event that should remain forever in U.S. musical landscape.”<sup>208</sup> Of all of the attention the festival received, the numerous publications did not focus on the monetary issues. Instead, they gave the festival credit for the broad variety of original music and strong community atmosphere.<sup>209</sup>

Between festivals, Kennedy added a toll free telephone number that allowed customers to purchase advanced tickets using credit cards.<sup>210</sup> Presales helped guarantee income regardless of what weather problems might occur during the festival.<sup>211</sup> Another round of Folk Aid benefit concerts across the nation also helped to increase the cash flow.<sup>212</sup> As Kennedy remembers, the Folk Aid benefit concerts over the years saved the festival by calling attention to the fact that the festival had financial problems and needed help.<sup>213</sup> Additional income arrived with the fifty percent increase of Southwest Airlines’ sponsorship. Early program advertisers, such as Whole Foods, Budweiser, and Poor David’s Pub, also helped generate enough cash flow to continue for another year.<sup>214</sup>

The eighteenth annual festival took place May 25 to June 11, 1989. *Sing Out!* Corporations decided to join in partnership with the Kerrville Music Foundation to sponsor the New Folk Competition, thereby helping bring additional cash sponsorship,

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<sup>208</sup> Gerry Wood, “Industry Bigs Rally to Save a Texas Folk Festival Tradition,” *Billboard*, pg 38, February 20, 1988, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>209</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 319; Bob Claypool and Townsend Miller were two additional writers that attracted attention to the festival throughout the beginning years. Through their continual support, the festival gained attention from wider audiences across the state. These two men died between the 1988 and 1989 festivals. A memorial was held at Chapel Hill in their honor.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, 314; 1989 Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>211</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 315.

<sup>212</sup> 1989 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>213</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>214</sup> 1989 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

and national publicity to the event.<sup>215</sup> In 1989, 453 up-and-coming songwriters entered the contest, nearly twice the number of 1988 entries.<sup>216</sup>

The festival's second weekend offered a new two-hour Native American event on Saturday as a preview to the weeklong Festival of the Eagle planned for the following year.<sup>217</sup> Because of his concerns over public discrimination toward Native Americans, Kennedy wanted to celebrate their contributions and culture by hosting a variety of Native American performances, lectures, and activities.<sup>218</sup> Kennedy convened a seminar and luncheon at the nearby Inn of the Hills to discuss the logistics of the festival's expansion, including the celebration of Native American culture.<sup>219</sup>

### **1990 – 1998: Bankruptcy and Recovery**

1990 ushered in a drastic change for the festival. Because of bad weather and other issues, the festival had incurred a debt of over \$400,000. So, Rod Kennedy decided to file two separate Chapter Eleven Bankruptcies on January 19, 1990, one for himself and another for the Kerrville Festivals, Inc.<sup>220</sup> By filing for bankruptcy, he would avoid missing payment deadlines, the foreclosure of the Ranch, and the seizure of assets by the Federal Government.<sup>221</sup> Filing for bankruptcy also would allow him to set up a three-part

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> 1989 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>217</sup> 1989 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>218</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 318.

<sup>219</sup> 1989 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 322; Documents from the United States Bankruptcy Court, Western District of Texas, January 19, 1990, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>221</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

debt reduction plan that would enable the festival and all other events to operate more efficiently.<sup>222</sup> One of the first changes included an increase in ticket price and a decrease in the number of main stage performers.<sup>223</sup>

Rod Kennedy announced the news of the bankruptcy filings to fans in Dallas at Poor David's Pub, the first stop on the 1990 publicity tour. Kennedy wanted an opportunity to explain directly to fans how the bankruptcy might affect the festival's future. As difficult as it was to deliver the sad news to friends, fans, and the press, Kennedy now describes the entire bankruptcy experience as "character building," and claims that "maybe we just needed a bit more."<sup>224</sup> Despite the bankruptcy, Southwest Airlines renewed as festival sponsor. La Hacienda, a private rehabilitation facility for alcohol and drug abusers, also joined as a full corporate sponsor for the first time.<sup>225</sup>

As a way to increase sales and efficiency, the festival added even more toll free numbers for early credit card purchases.<sup>226</sup> Also, Kennedy booked many nationally known artists, such as Shawn Colvin, Peter Rowan, and two-time Grammy award winner Janis Ian, as well as festival favorites Bobby Bridger, Melissa Javors, Allen Damron, Robert Earl Keen, Steven Fromholz, Bob Gibson, Eliza Gilkyson, Sara Hickman, Gary P. Nunn, and Peter Yarrow, to help insure a profitable year.<sup>227</sup> In spite of criticism from

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<sup>222</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 322.

<sup>223</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>224</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>225</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 323; La Hacienda Proposal, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/6, C.A.H., U.T.; Bill W. is one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which is dedicated to helping alcoholics achieve sobriety.

<sup>226</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>227</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 324; sponsorships were also increased to two hundred dollars with hopes of securing success for 1990.

some publications regarding the mismanagement of funds and the possible end to the Kerrville Folk Festival, the 1990 season went on as planned, and the first weekend resulted in a huge turnout.

One of the many festival events included the Memorial Day Blues Project, at which an audience of over 1,500 people listened to performers talk, play songs, and jam.<sup>228</sup> The Festival of the Eagle, the Native American tribute planned for the second week, did not take place as anticipated. Kennedy decided to postpone it until the twentieth anniversary the following year.<sup>229</sup> Instead, campers had a free week to relax and congregate around the campfires. The weather cooperated, ticket sales were strong, and the 1990 festival was a big success. The Kennedys paid off all of the past due taxes and twenty percent of the other debts.

Preparations for the festival's twentieth anniversary began immediately. Bobby Rector designed a special twenty-year promotional logo, and the organizers published a special festival songbook, along with an updated version of the festival directory.<sup>230</sup> It included numerous listings of performance venues, radio stations, and press, print media, and small record labels throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.<sup>231</sup>

The festival also made an important move towards "going green." In 1989, some 300 festival attendees across the United States, England, Canada, and Holland, signed a

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<sup>228</sup> 1990 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 325; Performers included Roy Book Binder, Spencer Bohren, Lilian Standfield, Steve James, and Kurt Van Sickle.

<sup>229</sup> 1990 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>230</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 329.

<sup>231</sup> 1991 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; the directory cost twenty-five dollars.

petition to ban the use of plastic cups at the ranch.<sup>232</sup> The petition stated their concern regarding “Kerrville’s impact on the environment,” and urged Kennedy “to be a leader in adopting a ‘no plastic’ policy.”<sup>233</sup> The goal was to replace the styrofoam and plastic cups and plates used in all food sales and backstage kitchen areas with renewable, recyclable, biodegradable non-toxic products.

Kennedy agreed and started working to put the plan in place. After attending the Vancouver Folk Festival, which did not allow any throw away items, he knew Kerrville could accomplish the task, too.<sup>234</sup> Kennedy implemented this new rule by requiring concessioners to provide a durable, hard plastic souvenir cups that came with a belt hook to help festival-goers hang on to their cups.<sup>235</sup> This small act not only saved the festival money on trash services and pickup, but it also reduced the amount of trash the festival produced by over eighteen tons.<sup>236</sup>

A few low points of the off-season included the expiration of La Hacienda’s sponsorship, and the cut back of support from Southwest Airlines for the 1991 season. Also, the long awaited book manuscript by Larry Willoughby that covered the first two decades of the festival’s history was stolen before it could be published.<sup>237</sup> However, this tragic incident inspired Kennedy to start collecting his files and write his own book that would tell the history of the Kerrville festival.

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<sup>232</sup> Petition, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/12, C.A.H., U.T.; Greenpeace, who had a booth at the festival in 1989, sparked the idea to send around a petition.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009; the Vancouver Festival even washed and sanitized plates from the garbage to reuse.

<sup>235</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 68.

<sup>236</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 331.

<sup>237</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 329-330.

The twentieth anniversary festival ran from May 23 to June 9, 1991. The list of performers included a wide variety of Texas, national, and international performers. Kennedy tried a unique addition to this year's weeknight sundown concerts. He decided to highlight a particular city through a "campfire" oriented concert. A few years earlier, "Camp Coho," a group from Seattle, Washington, created a CD of campfire songs as an effort to finance their trip back to the festival. After hearing their music, Kennedy invited them to participate in the first "campfire" concert.<sup>238</sup> This addition proved to be a success, and Kennedy looked forward to highlighting another national music scene in 1992.

During the early 1990s, it became increasingly popular for festival-goers to name their campsites. Many "families" or "communities" of people other camp in the same location every year, and they bring a variety of amenities and decorations to make their camp a "home away from home." Over the years, the well-established campsites acquired rather creative names. This tradition of naming campsites is an important part of "Kerr-culture" and still continues today. Some of the better-known campsites include Camp Stupid, Camp Cuisine, Camp Nashville, The Crow's Nest, Camp Duct Tape, Camp Sing Kerrnicity, Camp Moco Verde, Camp C.A.L.M., Camp Bungee, Camp Jews Don't Camp, Camp Inertia, Camp Bayou Love, and the Rouse House.

One of the most popular campsites is Camp Cuisine, which began at the 1988 Festival. As some campers recall, people from two adjacent camps began exchanging music for food. Over time, more and more musicians from around the ranch stopped by to eat and jam. The following year, members from both groups decided to combine camps. Over the years, camp members have brought a variety of amenities to the ranch including stoves, pizza ovens, and even a refrigerator. Camp Cuisine is now "famous" not

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<sup>238</sup> <http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com>, accessed 1 August 2009.

only for its food, but also for the many talented musicians who gather there every night.<sup>239</sup> As Rachel Bissex notes, the campsite has become so well-known that now, “you need an invitation to play there, and the quality of songs are top notch.”<sup>240</sup>

Camp Nashville is also a very well-developed camp community. Like Camp Cuisine, it has become increasingly difficult for non-camp members to play there, because these “family” members only get the chance to reunite once a year. Another well-known camp is Camp Stupid. This campsite is known for being very hospitable, hosting circles that welcome almost anyone to join. It has a big top tent to accommodate large numbers of guests.<sup>241</sup>

Other camps include Camp C.A.L.M., which stands for the Conroe Association for Live Music. Camp C.A.L.M. is known for hosting poetry recordings around its campfire. Camp Singkerrnicity not only boasts a group of gourmet chefs, it also has a guitar rack that accommodates up to forty guitars!<sup>242</sup> There is also the Rouse House, a group who welcomes New Folk finalists that might need supplies or food during their stay at the festival. Each camp or community has its own set of evolving traditions that adds to the festival’s growing “Kerr-culture.”

The twentieth anniversary festival also launched the first Festival of the Eagle. This festival within a festival focused on the spirit, culture, and history of Native Americans. Floyd Westerman, Kevin Locke, Bill Miller, John Trudell, Roxy Gordon, Mitch Walking Elk, and Gayle Ross all participated in songs, conversations, and stories

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<sup>239</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 101, 104.

<sup>240</sup> <http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com>, accessed 1 August 2009.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

about American Indian folklore on Chapel Hill. Native American craft villages, ceremonial circles, and a tee-pee area was set up to allow attendees to view Native American culture first hand.<sup>243</sup> Many of the participating artists believed it was important to share with audiences problems that still concern American Indians.<sup>244</sup> Another event, the annual Fish Fry, now held on the final evening of the festival, included music from Gamble Rogers and a twelve member festival orchestra, all memorializing the festival staff and friends who passed away during the first twenty years.<sup>245</sup>

The twentieth anniversary festival was successful on many levels. 2,500 fans attended the eighteen-day event, breaking festival attendance records.<sup>246</sup> This helped the festival continue to make payments towards its bankruptcy reduction plan. The festival's financial success helped convince Southwest Airlines to join as sponsor for a sixth year.<sup>247</sup>

The twenty-first annual festival, set for May 21 to June 7, 1992, included performances from Steve Key, Valdy, Jimmy LaFave, Crow Johnson, Sara Hickman, Turk Pipkin, Ain't Misbehavin', Utah Phillips, Jon Ims, Banded Geckos, Mitch Walking Elk, The Sundogs, Heidi Muller, Timbuk 3, Bootfare, Chuck Pyle, Paul Glasse Sextet, and numerous others.<sup>248</sup> Kennedy decided to add a new event on Saturday mornings, a

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<sup>243</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 333-334; 1991 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; Non-Indian performers included David Amram, Carolyn Hester, Eliza Gilkyson, Bobby Bridger, Sid Hausman, Larry Long, Rod MacDonald, and Peter Rowan.

<sup>244</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 271-272.

<sup>245</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 335; 1991 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>246</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 336.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid*, 339.

<sup>248</sup> 1992 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

Shabbat Service, led by Rabbi Kerry Baker. Kennedy hoped this service would complement the Folk Mass services on Sunday for those festival-goers of Jewish faith.<sup>249</sup> All other regular festival events went on as usual throughout the festival, and a second Festival of the Eagle took place during the second week.

Over the years, Kennedy's affection for and knowledge of wine increased, so he decided to combine a wine event with the Labor Day festival, entitled The Kerrville Wine and Music Festival. This festival showcased both Texas wineries and a wide variety of music. The Wine and Music festival has grown in popularity over the past eighteen years.

At the start of its twenty-second year, the festival boasted more than 100 performers, 600 volunteers, 200 sponsors, and hundreds of press personnel from all across the country, a remarkable increase from its humble beginnings in 1972.<sup>250</sup> In fact, over the years, more than 1,100 performers from across Texas, the United States, Austria, Australia, England, France, Israel, Italy, Canada, and Russia have performed at Kerrville. The festival office receives more than 1,000 audition tapes each year, but only has room for 125 artists on the schedule.<sup>251</sup> The festival has become internationally recognized for introducing audiences to up-and-coming songwriters.

Kennedy decided to add a few rather unique bands to the lineup in 1993, as a way to continue introducing fans to a broad range of music. These included Pele Juju, a world beat band from Santa Cruz, two all female groups known as the Righteous Mothers and Saffire, and Limpopo, a group of Russians that played what they called "folk and roll."<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 341.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 347-348.

<sup>251</sup> 1993 Festival Brief Profile, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.

Other artists for the May 27 to June 13 festival included national recording star Gail Davies, Clay Blaker, The Billies, Dick Siegel, David Broza, John Gorka, Bootfare, T.R. Ritchie, Killbilly, Anne Hills, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Tommy Sands, and Tom Paxton.<sup>253</sup>

The 1993 New Folk competition drew an incredible 628 entries from forty-two states, Canada, and Germany. Each year, New Folk competition continues to grow and garner praise for the talented artists it attracts. In 1992 and 1993, the main stage at Kerrville featured 51 former New Folk winners.<sup>254</sup> Many New Folk performers that have since gained national attention still return to Kerrville regularly to play homage to the “family” that helped them on the road to professional success.

Another addition to the 1993 festival was the taping of Tom May’s “River City Folk,” a radio program broadcast weekly on over 150 stations across the United States.<sup>255</sup> This radio show helped provide the festival and its artists greater national attention. The 1993 season also included the third and final Festival of the Eagle. Although it provided a rewarding experience, the Festival of the Eagle drained an average of \$18,000 a year from the budget. Another new event, a Reggae Salute, brought Root One, Leroy Shakespeare, and Ship of Vibes to the festival for the first time. This further broadened the musical diversity of the festival.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 348; with Southwest Airlines on board to sponsor another year of the festival, these artists were able to fly in at relatively low prices, which helped keep the travel budget inline.

<sup>253</sup> 1993 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>254</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 341; 1993 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>255</sup> 1993 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File C.A.H., U.T.; [www.tommayfolk.com](http://www.tommayfolk.com), accessed 9 September 2009.; “River City Folk” highlights the acoustic music scene and remains today one of the premier showcases for acoustic singer/songwriters nationally.

<sup>256</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 352.

During the off-season, Southwest Airlines renewed its sponsorship, and Whole Foods Markets joined as a co-sponsor. Also, *Texas Monthly* featured the festival in its April edition of “Best of Texas Events.” As preparations for the 1994 festival continued, Kennedy met with volunteer staff coordinators Bobby Peele and Vaughn Hafner to discuss problems on the ranch, including the increasing number of being parked each year in the campground area. Kennedy imposed a \$5 fee to park in the campground but offered free parking in nearby field. This change alleviated 630 camping spaces for the 1994 festival.<sup>257</sup>

Another rule, established in 1993, but implemented for the first time in 1994 was the inclusion of the “Land Rush.” Festival-goers continued to arrive early every year to insure that they could camp in their usual “campsite.” This created a significant liability for the festival. The “Land Rush,” or resettlement day, gave everyone an equal opportunity to stake out their camping area. At the “Land Rush,” a flag dropped at twelve in the afternoon the Sunday before the start of the festival to allow festival-goers a chance to claim their camping home.<sup>258</sup>

1994 also marked the year that Vern Crawford and others from “Camp Peace of Mind” created the first “Kerr-lendar” of the month. This calendar commemorated the unique customs that take place throughout the festival. A few of these traditions include St. PatKerrick’s Day, Cinco de Kerr, Home Kerr-ming Day, Kerr-easter, and Kerr-di Gras.<sup>259</sup> Also, in 1994, Steve Wood published the second volume of the Kerrictionary,

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 355-356, 364; a temporary pass would be granted for those just unloading and loading their camping gear.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 364.

<sup>259</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 255-256.

which included updated commentary, additional festival history notes, and new “Kerr” words.<sup>260</sup> The Kerr-lendar and further development of the Kerrictionary and Kerr-language provide additional documentation for the festival’s ever-growing “Kerr-culture.”

In discussing the unique culture of Kerrville, Dyanne Cortez says that, “culture isn’t something that just happens on stage . . . it’s defined by our daily habits, our special celebrations, and the recurring traditions that ‘Kerr-verts’ have developed, on stage and off, over the years.”<sup>261</sup> The continual development of this distinct culture allows all festival participants a chance to add their own mark on the festival, and it is a main reason why many festival-goers return every year.

The twenty-third annual festival, set for May 26 through June 12, 1994, welcomed many returning acts, such as Bill and Bonnie Hearne, Jon Ims, Bobby Bridger, Peter Yarrow, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Allen Damron, Gail Davies, Carolyn Hester, Gary P. Nunn, Josh White, Jr., Jimmy LaFave, Tish Hinojosa, Tom Paxton, and The Austin Lounge Lizards.<sup>262</sup> One newcomer of note was Ani DiFranco, from Buffalo, New York, who would go on to national prominence.<sup>263</sup> Because the Festival of the Eagle no longer took place, the second week was left open for relaxation, river trips, singing around the campfire, cooking out, and other leisurely activities that concluded with sundown

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<sup>260</sup> Kerrictionary, Vol. II, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/12, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>261</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 255.

<sup>262</sup> 1994 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid; this years “camp” oriented concert brought the Colorado camp to the stage on the second weekend, which highlighted Celeste Krenz, Steven Allen Davis, Bob Taylor, and Chuck Pyle.

concerts every evening.<sup>264</sup> The festival drew record crowds of more than 30,000 over eighteen days.

During the off-season, a group of “Kerr-leaders” met at a retreat in Austin to discuss ways to improve the festival. They decided to increase first aid and insect control, add a gourmet coffee concession stand, explore using the internet as a way to advertise and disseminate festival information, and create a “volunteer of the year” award.<sup>265</sup>

The festival’s volunteers serve as the life-blood of the festival. There are generally around 600 to 800 volunteers on staff during each festival. Many also come throughout the year to help with additional projects especially during the months leading up to the festival. These “work weekends” also help reinforce the community spirit and camaraderie of those who participate.

During the festival, volunteers are responsible for maintaining the stages, security, trash and sanitation, selling tickets, directing cars, concession stands, and a variety of other tasks that keep the festival running smoothly. Each crew has a crew leader and supervisors that help show volunteers what to do and where to go. It is not uncommon for volunteers over the years to switch crews or move up to a leadership role. As Dyanne Cortez mentioned, being a volunteer gives you “a special bond to the festival that I would never have known if I had remained a mere spectator.”<sup>266</sup>

At one time, festival volunteers received cash for their labor, in addition to free camping, free entrance into the festival, free staff t-shirts, and hot showers. Over time, payment for work switched to a ticket system. This allowed volunteers the opportunity to

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<sup>264</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 359.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 364-365.

<sup>266</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 112.

purchase items at the concession stands or Kerrtry store with the coupons. A variety of control measures set restrictions over the years that limited the usage of these tickets.<sup>267</sup> The payment method still works on a ticket system today, but the festival is continually modifying it.

The newly implemented “volunteer of the year” award recognized the hard work, dedication, and energy that volunteers put in to making the festival so special. As mentioned previously, the staff concert provided another way to allow the festival to honor its volunteers. Over the years, staff members have formed special bonds with one another that have added yet another dimension to the unique “Kerr-culture” that thrives at the festival.

For the 1995 festival, organizers modified The New Folk Competition rules. Kennedy placed a maximum of 600 on the number of entrants and decreased the finalist total from 40 to 32.<sup>268</sup> The weekday events included Session I and II of the Foundation’s Songwriting School, a Foundation sponsored Music Business Workshop, and Sundown Concerts in the evenings. A special “Legends of Folk” tribute to Bob Gibson took place during the Sundown Concerts the first week. Allen Damron, Anne Hills, Michael Smith, Josh White, Jr., and Peter Yarrow helped raise enough money to purchase Gibson a motorized wheel chair in order to demonstrate their appreciation for his many contributions.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>268</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 364, 366.

<sup>269</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 367; 1995 Festival Brochure, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.; Bob Gibson was diagnosed with Super Nuclear Palsy (SNP). This benefit not only furnished him with a new motorized wheel chair, but also much needed in home care.

The 1995 festival was well-attended and generally successful. Kennedy hoped this success would carry over into the festival's twenty-fifth anniversary year in 1996. He and the staff decided to extend the festival to twenty-five days with 150 performers as a way to help celebrate the festival's twenty-fifth anniversary. Schlotzky's Deli joined Southwest Airlines and Whole Foods as corporate level sponsors.<sup>270</sup> In addition, the festival launched the Tag-a-Child program in which each child that registered received a bracelet with contact information for their parents.<sup>271</sup>

The all-star anniversary lineup in 1996 included Allen Damron, Carolyn Hester, Dar Williams, Pele Juju, Guy Clark, Michael Martin Murphey, Lucinda Williams, Nanci Griffith, Robert Earl Keen, Sara Hickman, Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Odetta, The Austin Lounge Lizards, Bobby Bridger, and Peter Yarrow. As usual, the festival offered a wide variety of events and concerts throughout the extended twenty-five day event. In addition, the "campfire" concert series focused this year on Dallas and Detroit, while the "River City Folk" radio program held two tapings, and a memorial concert honored performers and family who passed away over the years.<sup>272</sup> The festival broke all previous attendance records.

Despite the success of the 1996 twenty-fifth anniversary, all three corporate sponsors decided not to renew for the upcoming 1997 season, leaving the festival in a financial bind. Fortunately, however, Elixir Guitar Strings agreed to join as a corporate sponsor.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 364, 72.

<sup>271</sup> <http://www.kyhote.com/kff/history.htm>, accessed 1 August 2009.

<sup>272</sup> Kennedy, *Music from the Heart*, 377.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, 379.

Kennedy and the other organizers decided to scale back the 1997 festival to its regular eighteen-day format. However, they also agreed to add an advanced Songwriting and Music Business School. Other new events included a three-day foundation sponsored Booking and Management Seminar that gave attendees the opportunity to learn from professionals in the booking and management field.<sup>274</sup> The 1997 festival also included a conference entitled “What Men Don’t Know,” inspired by Kennedy’s realization, “that for centuries, if not since the beginning of time, the world has deprived itself of what women had to offer.” In his opinion, “female songwriters have created some of the most incredible songs with insight and sensitivity.”<sup>275</sup> Kennedy believed that holding a seminar focusing on these issues might help raise women’s confidence in their own strengths and individuality.

Festival main stage acts included such performers as Israel’s David Broza, Connie Kaldor of Montreal, David Roth from Seattle, Martin Sexton from Massachusetts, Jimmy Landry of North Carolina, Sara Hickman of Austin, Limpopo from Russia, and Fred Eaglesmith of Ontario, Canada.<sup>276</sup>

Between the 1997 and 1998 festivals, Rod Kennedy completed his autobiographical book, *Music From the Heart: The Fifty-Year Chronicle of His Life in Music (With a Few Sidetrips!)*, which documents the history of the first twenty-five years of the festival and a fifty-year history of his involvement in the music business.<sup>277</sup> During

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<sup>274</sup> 1997 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/12, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>275</sup> David Tarrant, “Rod Kennedy: He Brings the Sound of Music to the Hill Country,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 1, 1997, Rod Kennedy, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>276</sup> 1997 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/12, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>277</sup> Kennedy, *Music From the Heart: The Fifty-Year Chronicle of His Life in Music (With a Few Sidetrips!)* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1998).

the off-season, the festival also announced the creation of a website and email address for both festival and foundation information and updates.<sup>278</sup>

As preparations for the 1998 season continued, Elixir Guitar Strings renewed its sponsorship for a second year. The twenty-seventh festival welcomed 33 new artists to the main stage, including Keith Greeninger, Ana Egge, Susan Shore, Dayna Kurtz, Amilia Spicer, Mickey Newbury, and the unscheduled arrival of Jackson Browne.<sup>279</sup> Other new additions in 1998 included a one hour song swap hosted every evening by Steve Gillette entitled the “Texas and Tennessee” Song Circle.

It rained sporadically throughout the festival, some days even producing hail.<sup>280</sup> However, because the festival had become so well attended, occasional afternoon showers were now often considered a welcome relief from the heat, rather than a crippling financial burden. Although the 1998 festival was a success, there were important changes taking place. Rod and NancyLee Kennedy had begun preparing for retirement, and they started exploring options for selling the festival, the assets, and Quiet Valley Ranch.<sup>281</sup> This change worried many festival-goers, because the festival had already been through so many transformations over the years.

As it neared the end of the twentieth century, the Kerrville Folk Festival was world renowned as a premier songwriters’ event. Despite its success, however, many questions lingered regarding the future of the festival. How would the festival survive a

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<sup>278</sup> 1998 Festival Newsletter, Kennedy Collection, Box # 94-139/4, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> <http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com>, accessed 1 August 2009.

<sup>281</sup> Rod and NancyLee decided to separate in 1993, and eventually divorced one another. NancyLee remained in the house on the ranch and Rod created a private space in the backstage area to call his new home. Several years later, Rod completely moved off the ranch, but still resides in Kerrville.

change in ownership after the Kennedys retired? Would the well-established “Kerr-culture” and the ambiance of the festival be compromised? Many devoted “Kerr-verts” wondered what the new millennium had in store for their beloved Kerrville Folk Festival.

## **CHAPTER IV:**

### **LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE**

The new millennium brought a different set of challenges to the Kerrville Folk Festival that left the event's future in question once again. The festival had gone through many problems in the past, including bad weather, debt, and even bankruptcy, but changing ownership presented a new obstacle for festival attendees and staff alike. From the beginning, Rod Kennedy acted as the sole director, and made all decisions regarding festival operations. In the late 1990s, however, he and Nancy Lee had decided that it was time to consider selling the festival and Quiet Valley Ranch to begin preparations for their retirement.<sup>282</sup>

This chapter will focus on the change in ownership and a variety of other transformations that occurred throughout the first decade of the new millennium. It will also examine the overall impact that the festival has had, and continues to have, on the musical community and on the Texas singer-songwriter tradition. The chapter will conclude by discussing the festival's long-term prospects and historical legacy.

#### **Selling the Festival**

Rod and Nancy Lee Kennedy had become increasingly convinced that they should sell the festival, its assets, and Quiet Valley Ranch. By 1998, the Kennedys decided to

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<sup>282</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, Texas, 11 September 2009.

entrust this sale to former staff member Vaughn Hafner. Hafner had been attending the festival since the mid 1980s. He joined the volunteer staff in 1989, and eventually worked his way up to co-coordinator of staff administration.<sup>283</sup> Knowing the importance of the long-held festival traditions to the attendees, Hafner told festival-goers that he did not “want to change anything” and intended to “keep the festival just the way it has been.”<sup>284</sup> Stuart Vexler, Chairman of the Texas Folk Music Foundation Board’s Operating Committee, remembers that a group of people also went out to help raise money to facilitate the sale, which Hafner and the Kennedys finalized in 1999.<sup>285</sup>

Under the terms of the sale, Rod Kennedy would remain producer until 2002. After 2002, Kennedy would serve as a consultant, while Vaughn Hafner and others would assume responsibility for the finances and operational decisions. This arrangement was intended to help ensure the festival’s continuity and preserve its culture. Vexler recalls that there was a consensus among “Kerr-verts” that the most important thing was to guarantee that the festival would continue in the future. Also, they wanted to be reassured that their campsites and traditions would be the same as they had always been.<sup>286</sup>

During this transition period, much discussion took place regarding the possibility of the festival eventually becoming a non-profit entity. As support for this idea increased, organizers established the Texas Folk Music Foundation (TFMF), a non-profit business corporation 501 (c)(3), in 1999 as an outgrowth of Kennedy’s Kerrville Music

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<sup>283</sup> Cortez, *Hot Jams and Cold Showers*, 293.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid*, 294.

<sup>285</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid*.

Foundation. The mission of TFMF is to promote the appreciation of folk music while educating the public about the benefits and characteristics of folk music and songwriting.<sup>287</sup> One main goal of TFMF includes providing folk music education through workshops, seminars, and other events. These programs and events provide support for songwriters by offering a sustainable environment in which they can develop and be introduced to the public.<sup>288</sup> TFMF took over the events at the festival previously produced and sponsored by Rod Kennedy's Kerrville Music Foundation, including the New Folk Competition, the Songwriting School, and the Memorial Day Blues Workshop.

### **1999-2002: Adjusting to Change**

Despite the behind-the-scenes changes, the festival went on as planned for its twenty-eighth year. The 1999 festival included such well-established events as New Folk, Ballad Tree, Folk Mass, Shabbat services, Children's Concerts, Sundown Concerts, Staff Concert, and an England/Ireland and Salt Lake City "campfire" concert. Main stage acts included festival regulars, such as Steven Fromholz, Austin Lounge Lizards, David Amram, Butch Hancock, Bill Staines, Peter Yarrow, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Steve Gillette, Bobby Bridger, festival volunteer Kevin So, and Bill and Bonnie Hearne, who were making their twenty-eighth consecutive festival appearance<sup>289</sup>

As the festival entered the new millennium in 2000, organizers began many new facility projects to help improve the grounds. Stuart Vexler points out that "people

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<sup>287</sup> [www.tfmf.org](http://www.tfmf.org), accessed 15 August 2009; Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>288</sup> [www.tfmf.org](http://www.tfmf.org), accessed 15 August 2009.

<sup>289</sup> [www.itcanbethiswayalways.com](http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com), accessed 1 August 2009; Kevin So had a unique story. He worked his way up from the campgrounds, to become a part of the Staff CD, then won the New Folk Competition, and finally made an appearance on the main stage.

underestimate the extent to which having the festival every year at Quiet Valley Ranch requires maintenance and fixing things up.” He further noted that “whoever is in governance, or taking the responsibility, ends up spending a great deal of their time on facility management, and some of the very basic greenery and beautification gets put off for necessities.”<sup>290</sup>

One new project was the addition of more spaces for RVs, or recreational vehicles. Hafner and staff hoped that an RV facility could operate at ninety percent occupancy year round, since other similar facilities in the area did so.<sup>291</sup> Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case for Quiet Valley Ranch. Although RV spots did sell out for each festival, most were not rented out for the remainder of the year. Another addition to the ranch involved building a bridge and stone staircase up to Chapel Hill.<sup>292</sup> This helped decrease the risk of festival-goers injuring themselves while trekking up the hill.

In an effort to end the main stage concerts at an earlier hour, Kennedy decided to cut back on the number of main stage acts.<sup>293</sup> Some of the main stage acts in 2000 included Clandestine, Eliza Gilkyson, Jimmy LaFave, Chuck Pyle, Terri Hendrix, Shake Russell, Tish Hinojosa, Kevin So, Trout Fishing in America, Peter Rowan, Carolyn Aiken, and up-and-coming singer-songwriter Ruthie Foster. The festival events and activities still appeared to be running smoothly under the new ownership as the festival began preparations for the thirtieth anniversary year.

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<sup>290</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> [www.itcanbethiswayalways.com](http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com), accessed 1 August 2009.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

The 2001 festival lineup, staged for May 24 to June 10, showed how much this originally all Texas line-up had expanded to include acts from around the world. In fact, only 16 of the 72 main stage acts were from Texas.<sup>294</sup> David Broza from Spain, Jonathan Edwards from St. Croix, Virgin Islands, Juliet Turner of Ireland, Ray Bonneville of Montreal, and Dennis Kamakahi of Hawaii are just a few of the acts that traveled from far away to play the festival's main stage.

The thirtieth anniversary festival included a number of special. Joe Kendall and Bill Oliver of the Chataqua Foundation hosted canoe trips on the Guadalupe River every Friday morning. There was also a three-day Blues Guitar Workshop and the twenty-second Songwriting School, along with the fifth annual Music, Business, Booking, Management, Performance, and Recording Seminar, which consisted of discussions on touring and using the internet to promote artists' careers.<sup>295</sup> This year's "campfire" concert focused on Michigan. The festival ended with the annual Fish Fry and memorial concert performance by the Festival Orchestra.

As organizers looked forward to the thirty-first season, planned for May 23 to June 9, 2002, they soon realized that a variety of new and ongoing facility projects needed attention. These included pouring a concrete slab for the new showers behind the Kerrtry Store complex and a slab for the Threadgill Theater reconstruction project.<sup>296</sup> Also, volunteers installed twelve tall poles at Chapel Hill which would eventually be used to create a more permanent structure that could provide shade.

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<sup>294</sup> 2001 Festival Program, Kerrville Folk Festival, Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.; all of the workshops and seminars cost one hundred and sixty-five dollars to attend, and included lunch, camping, and the Sundown Concerts.

<sup>296</sup> [www.itcanbethiswayalways.com](http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com), accessed 1 August 2009.

In addition to all of the grounds maintenance work, TFMF decided to add a new development program as a way to further publicize folk music and the musical community. The Teacher's Professional Development Program, involved all day workshops and classes that covered a variety of topics and was certified by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for teachers to earn continuing education credits. As an extension to the Teacher's Development Program, Stuart Vexler and TFMF also launched the University Songwriters Competition in hopes of nurturing and promoting younger singer-songwriters.<sup>297</sup>

The formation of AllKids provided another way for younger children to become more involved with the festival. This program created volunteer jobs for kids and teenaged 13 to 18 and gave them a way to earn food and drink tickets.<sup>298</sup> In addition, AllKids served as an opportunity to mentor these young teens in hopes that they would eventually join the adult volunteer staff. Another change to the 2002 festival included raising the price for parking in the campgrounds to \$20. Festival staff hoped this would encourage campers to carpool, thereby providing additional spaces for tents and campsites.

No other changes were made to the basic festival structure in 2002. Main stage performers included Tish Hinojosa, Caroline Aiken, The Waybacks, Slaid Cleaves, Ellis Paul, Eric Schwartz, Michael Smith, Bobby Bridger, Ray Wylie Hubbard, The Burns Sisters, Jimmy LaFave, and a special birthday celebration concert with Peter Yarrow.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> [www.tfmf.org](http://www.tfmf.org), accessed 15 August 2009.

<sup>298</sup> <http://www.kyhote.com/kff/history.htm>, accessed 1 August 2009.

<sup>299</sup> [www.itcanbethiswayalways.com](http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com), accessed 1 August 2009.

The 2002 festival was a success, but as the impending retirement of Rod Kennedy in October drew closer, shareholders and board members worked to address such challenges as increasing debt, questionable spending on facility and construction projects, and the festival's future in general.<sup>300</sup> Unfortunately, since 1999 when Vaughn Hafner took over ownership, the festival had three consecutive years that lost substantial amounts of money. Meetings were held throughout the 2002 festival and into the summer in an attempt to come up with a plan on how to save the festival's finances again.<sup>301</sup> During these meetings, Vaughn Hafner's role in the festival's future was also closely examined.

Tensions mounted on all sides throughout the summer, as this period proved to be another very trying time for all involved. It was finally decided that in order for the festival to survive, a larger group should have ownership of it instead of a single person. This would allow decisions to be made on a more democratic and participatory level than ever before.

According to Michael D'Eath, festival attendee and current Chairman of the TFMF Board of Directors, most of the shareholders "were people who had gone to the festival and, to an extent, had more personal stock, because they wanted to keep the festival going and didn't expect to make any money off of it."<sup>302</sup> Among the nearly forty shareholders were then Chairman of Kerrville Folk Festival, Inc., Stuart Vexler, and festival attendee Michael D'Eath. Along with other shareholders and festival regulars,

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.; the three festival Boards included Kerrville Folk Festival, Inc., Quiet Valley Ranch Corporation, and the Texas Folk Music Foundation (TFMF). These boards essentially took over as the head of operations in Vaughn Hafner's absence.

<sup>301</sup> Stuart Vexler, Telephone Interview with author, Austin, Texas, 8 March 2010.

<sup>302</sup> Michael D'Eath, Interview with author, Austin, Texas, 11 September 2009.

Vexler and D'Eath agreed to take responsibility for paying off tax debts incurred by Nancy Lee Kennedy after the sale of the ranch and other mounting debts.<sup>303</sup> In order to do so, these shareholders contributed substantial amounts of their own money, and some even placed second liens on their homes.<sup>304</sup> Although this undoubtedly placed a significant financial burden on shareholders and others, it was testament to the strong sense of community and commitment among Kerrville regulars.<sup>305</sup>

During the 2002 meetings, attendees also decided that in order to seriously investigate the possibility of having the non-profit corporation TFMF purchase the festival, an appraisal and audit of the festival's funds, net worth, and financial books would be needed.<sup>306</sup> The audit revealed that the festival's net worth was more than the debt owed. This showed that the festival did in fact have potential for future income. Now, it would be a matter of raising enough money to make the idea of becoming a non-profit a reality.

In 2002, TFMF's main relationship with the festival was through the festival programs. Essentially, TFMF raised money from sponsors and donors to pay the Kerrville Folk Festival to produce its programs and events. As a way to expand its relationship with the festival, TFMF decided it would attempt to lead the Threadgill Theater remodel project. Since all of TFMF programs took place at the Threadgill

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<sup>303</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>304</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>305</sup> This was a controversial and unpleasant period in the festival's history. Several people I spoke with who were involved in this situation did not want to discuss it due to lingering hurt feelings. Many believed that it was in the best interest of the festival to move from single ownership to group ownership. However, Vaughn Hafner, did not want to be removed from his duties, and this helped make the transition difficult for everyone involved.

<sup>306</sup> Michael D'Eath, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

Theater, organizers believed that once complete, the theater could serve as the Foundation's home on the ranch. In addition, TFMF already had interested donors willing to raise money to cover the cost of materials and lend their building expertise. Many festival volunteer staff also offered to help. The remodeling of the Threadgill Theater went well. Organizers cleared a two-acre space for the 1500 person theater, including backstage greenrooms, recording facility, decks, and a large covered top.<sup>307</sup> This was the first of many trials in an effort to see how an increased working relationship between the festival and TFMF could benefit both organizations. It also allowed TFMF a chance to see if it could successfully undertake a smaller scale modification project, and get a better understanding on what larger projects it might be capable of handling in the future.

Other projects done in preparation for the 2003 festival included finishing the Octo-johns and building a permanent cinderblock shower behind the Kerrtry store. Volunteers also installed fifteen to twenty new electrical outlets with water access in the campground. The festival charged campers a daily fee of \$5 per extension cord. At the same time, Nancy Lee Kennedy ordered the materials to build her house on the ranch. Volunteers hoped to have it framed and sealed by the start of the festival so that she would have a permanent home on the ranch. In order to have ample time to complete these and other necessary tasks, the volunteer work weekends started in January instead of after the Easter weekend.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> [www.itcanbethiswayalways.com](http://www.itcanbethiswayalways.com), correspondence to Brian Cutean from Charles Weller, May 7, 2003, "Ranch Status Updates," accessed 15 August 2009.

### **2003-2006: A New Producer**

As preparations for the 2003 festival began, Rod Kennedy announced his retirement as producer, beginning in October 2002. When asked if it was a difficult decision to leave his life's work and legacy in the hands of someone else, he immediately responded, "you bet it was!" Upon his decision to leave, he decided to entrust his producing role to longtime festival attendee, staff member, and assistant, Dalis Allen. Before becoming producer, Allen's involvement included helping with the outreach programs, the Southwest Folk Alliance Conference, and a variety of other festival duties including setting up transportation and hotel accommodations for performers for both the folk festival and wine festival in the fall. In her new role as producer, she would still be responsible for these tasks, but also now be in charge of festival operations and performance booking.<sup>309</sup> As Stuart Vexler remembers, there was real unanimity that Allen would take over as producer. She already knew how the festival operated having worked with Kennedy all of those years, so it seemed quite natural to most staffers that Allen would step into the producer's role.<sup>310</sup>

The 2003 festival took place May 22 to June 8 under Allen's leadership. Main stage acts included Peter Yarrow and his daughter Bethany, Ruthie Foster, who continued to gain national prominence, Susan Gibson, The Sisters Morales, and the Kerrville Folk Festival debut of folk great, Judy Collins.<sup>311</sup> Other acts included LeRoy Parnell, The

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<sup>309</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>310</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>311</sup> 2003 Festival Newsletter, Kerrville Folk Festival Vertical File, C.A.H., U.T.

Resentments, Jimmy LaFave, Freebo, Eliza Gilkyson, Shawn Colvin, and Terri Hendrix.<sup>312</sup>

Many festival-goers, staff, and performers were pleased with the smooth transition to Dalis Allen as producer. As longtime festival attendee Kathleen Hudson stated, Allen “adds a personal touch to each introduction since she knows the performers so well.”<sup>313</sup> Musician and festival staff member Emily Lively also mentioned that Allen does an excellent job of bringing in a woman’s voice and sense of communication among performers and attendees.<sup>314</sup> Others remarked that Allen, the board members, and volunteers seemed to finally have a sense of cohesion that had been missing over the past couple of years.<sup>315</sup>

Dalis Allen’s management style is notably different from Rod Kennedy’s. Kennedy often proclaimed that he led a very strict operation, making all the decisions himself. Allen, however, seems to have a very calm and easy-going demeanor. As Kennedy noted, she does not let anything bother her, but instead takes most everything in stride.<sup>316</sup> Although Kennedy has commended Allen on the outstanding job that she has done, he admits that it took about three to four years to finally get used not being in charge.<sup>317</sup> As for taking on the responsibilities of producer, Allen stated that “before,

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<sup>312</sup> [www.jimdirden.com](http://www.jimdirden.com), accessed 12 July 2009.

<sup>313</sup> Kathleen Hudson, “On the Road,” June 11, 2003, [www.txheritagemusic.org](http://www.txheritagemusic.org), accessed 10 September 2009.

<sup>314</sup> Emily Lively, Telephone Interview with author, Fredericksburg, Texas, 2 February 2009.

<sup>315</sup> [www.cus.com/kerrville/2003/blairlendell.htm](http://www.cus.com/kerrville/2003/blairlendell.htm), accessed 20 September 2009.

<sup>316</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

when someone had a question about anything, I could always say, ‘you have to talk to Rod,’ but now, I have to give them an answer one way or another.”<sup>318</sup>

Dalis Allen’s first year as producer was a success, and plans were soon underway for the 2004 festival. As Kennedy mentioned, he was always very regimented in his timeline for preparations. He would have all acts booked by December 1, the announcement of the festival lineup was made in February, and the brochures and announcements went out in the mail by March 1. Allen developed a somewhat different process, which included a more flexible timeline.<sup>319</sup> Kennedy also had always taken great care to vary the styles and gender of performers in order to provide a diverse range of entertainment each evening. Allen, however, is more thematic and sometimes creates groupings of performances based on a variety of ideas.<sup>320</sup>

The Sundown Concerts for the 2004 festival exemplified this more thematic approach. These concerts featured a series that included “Vick Heyman presents Kick-Ass Women,” “Reba Heyman presents, Kick-Ass Men,” and a new event, New Folk In-the-Round, which highlighted previous New Folk finalists.<sup>321</sup> Main stage acts included Patrice Pike, Ian Moore, Peter, Paul, and Mary, JT Van Zandt, John Vandiver with Shake Russell, Two High String Band, The Subdudes, Monte Montgomery, Limpopo, Eliza Gilkyson, Bobby Bridger, and David Amram. Other activities featured Saturday morning bike rides, Friday canoe trips on the Guadalupe River, Saturday morning yoga, and a new TFMF event, the three-day Roots/Blues Guitar Workshop, which ran simultaneously with

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<sup>318</sup> Christopher Gray, “Grading on a Kerrve,” *Austin Chronicle*, May 16, 2003.

<sup>319</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> [www.jimdiriden.com/kerrville\\_2004-1of2/2004\\_schedule\\_full.pdf](http://www.jimdiriden.com/kerrville_2004-1of2/2004_schedule_full.pdf), 2004 Festival Brochure, accessed 20 September 2009.

the Songwriting School.<sup>322</sup> Also, in an effort to create partnerships with other music venues, publications, festivals, and organizations from across the country, the Kerrville Folk Festival teamed up with Austin Music Network, KUT 90.5 FM, and Sonicbids to help promote songwriters.<sup>323</sup>

2004 also marked the year the festival began erecting “natural” buildings on the ranch. “Natural” building uses locally abundant, unprocessed materials to create livable and usable structures and spaces in a more eco-friendly manner that integrates humans into the landscape.<sup>324</sup> With Frank Meyer, who had attended the “Natural Building Colloquium,” led the construction of a pizza oven near the Kerrtry store.<sup>325</sup> Following the completion of this successful first “natural” building, Dalis Allen became interested in constructing others and decided to hold the 2007 Natural Building Colloquium at the ranch. Organizers soon built other “natural” structures on the ranch, including the Mix Master Hut (festival entry booth), a Ballad Tree and Ceremony Stage area on Chapel Hill, a Staff Central Office, the Kids-ville Sandbox Sculptural Enclosure, and other smaller projects, such as composing toilets and recycling stations.<sup>326</sup>

A long-term project that had been discussed for years was having TFMF purchase the festival and its assets. This transaction would make the festival a non-profit entity. Many board members, stockholders, and festival attendees thought that this acquisition would streamline the boards, thereby making the governance of the festival more

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> [www.naturalbuildingtexas.org](http://www.naturalbuildingtexas.org), accessed 20 September 2009.

<sup>325</sup> [www.folkatfestival.com/festivalcoverage/kerrville2008No5](http://www.folkatfestival.com/festivalcoverage/kerrville2008No5), accessed 20 September 2009.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

efficient. Also, by operating as a full non-profit organization, the Board believed it would “assure the long-term future and success of the Kerrville Folk Festival and provide a greater level of financial security and funding options.”<sup>327</sup> In 2005, TFMF established a capital campaign to raise money for the purchase of the Kerrville Folk Festival, including assets and all liabilities. Relying on strong support from both the Kerrville community and the festival family, Michael D’Eath led the drive to raise \$40,000.<sup>328</sup> With the Capital Campaign underway, it appeared that the festival’s transition to a non-profit would soon become reality.

Building on this new momentum, organizers set the upcoming festival dates for May 26 through June 12, 2005. Some new events included a Monday Tribute to the late Bruce Rouse, Sundown Concerts with South Florida/Kerrville Songwriters In-the-Round, New Song Festival Songwriters In-the-Round, and another New Folk In-the-Round.<sup>329</sup> There was also a performance from the Ozark Orchestra, a panel discussion on “Finding a Market for Your Songs,” the Foundation’s three-day Harmonica Workshop, featuring Gary Primich, Rob Roy Parnell, and Gary Sapone, as well as the twenty-fifth annual Songwriters School.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> [www.tfmf.org](http://www.tfmf.org), accessed 2 December 2009.

<sup>328</sup> Michael D’Eath, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009; because the festival had always relied on attendees, musicians, and local sponsors, D’Eath and festival attendees did not want a big corporate donor to come in and make a large donation that might alter the organic culture of the event. So, it was essential that they were very selective with who they went to for donations.

<sup>329</sup> [www.jimdiriden.com/kerrville\\_2005.../2005%20KFF%20Schedule.pdf](http://www.jimdiriden.com/kerrville_2005.../2005%20KFF%20Schedule.pdf), 2005 Festival Brochure, accessed 20 September 2009; Bruce Rouse was a passionate devotee of acoustic music. He and his wife Liz were well known for hosting concerts at their house (The Rouse House Concerts) for over fifteen years. Liz and her daughters continue this legacy at the folk festival every year by hosting New Folk finalists at their campsite, The Rouse House.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Kids-Ville, where children learned to play music every morning, also became a popular destination for kids and parents alike. In 2005, the addition of a music appreciation class taught children to appreciate, value, and play music.<sup>331</sup> Another ongoing event co-sponsored by TFMF was the University Songwriters Competition, begun by Stuart Vexler in 2001. Student winners earn the honor of playing two songs on stage at the Kerrville Folk Festival. The contest gives these college students great exposure while also cultivating interest in the festival among the younger audiences. Creating these early connections with younger artists is crucial to the continuation of the festival.

As the festival continued through the 2005 season, there appeared to be momentum gathering among donors to help provide support for the acquisition of the festival. Organizers hoped to capitalize on this energy with the festival's thirty-fifth anniversary set to take place May 25 through June 11, 2006. This season featured more Texas artists than in years past, including Michael Fracasso, Slaid Cleaves, Terri Hendrix, Eric Taylor, Guy Clark, The Resentments, Steven Fromholz, South Austin Jug Band, and the Austin Lounge Lizards.<sup>332</sup> It also included a New Folk Club 7 Sundown Concert, which included a full evening of former New Folk Finalists that tied for seventh place over the years. The Harmonica Workshop moved to the second weekend, and a social consciousness songwriting panel was added. In addition, Reverend Walter Lee hosted a tribute to Allen Damron.<sup>333</sup> Damron was not only well known for playing an

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<sup>331</sup> [www.tfmf.org](http://www.tfmf.org), accessed 15 August 2009.

<sup>332</sup> [www.jimdirden.com/kerrville\\_2006-1of2/Full%20Schedule.pdf](http://www.jimdirden.com/kerrville_2006-1of2/Full%20Schedule.pdf), 2006 Festival Brochure, accessed 20 September 2009.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.; [www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 25 September 2009.

integral role in the development of the Kerrville Folk Festival as Director and one of Rod Kennedy's close friends, but he was also recognized across the country as a prolific folksinger, storyteller, and cowboy poet. In addition, he helped numerous young musicians break into the music scene. As Steven Fromholz remembers, "he was the best known 'unknown' figure in the music business."<sup>334</sup>

By the close of the thirty-fifth anniversary season, it was clear just how much the festival had changed since it began in the Kerrville auditorium back in 1972. Not only did attendance grow from 2,800 to the current number of more than 30,000, but the length of the festival expanded from three days to eighteen days.<sup>335</sup> The dozens of performers who have attended over the years have forged long-lasting personal and business friendships, and the festival's programs and contests have provided these artists with the necessary skills and opportunities to succeed in the music industry.

The programs that are now sponsored by TFMF include the Grassy Hill New Folk Competition, the Songwriting School, Blues/Roots Guitar Workshop, Kids-ville, Professional Development Program for Teachers, Summer Music Camp for Teens, the University Songwriting Competition, and the most recent project addition, the Kerrville History Project. The Kerrville History Project began in 2008 as a way to capture and preserve the history of the festival, with a special emphasis on the "Kerr-culture" of the volunteer staff and "Kerr-verts."<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Don M. Fisher, "Finding Yourself at Kerrville," *The Lone Star Iconoclast*, June 7, 2006, [www.lonestaricon.com](http://www.lonestaricon.com), accessed 20 September 2009.

<sup>335</sup> The longest festival was in 1996 when it was extended to twenty-five days to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary year.

<sup>336</sup> [www.tfmf.org](http://www.tfmf.org), accessed 20 September 2009.

The continuing expansion and improvements to the various programs offer a wide group of musicians and non-musicians a chance to grow and explore songwriting, folk music, and music appreciation. These types of outreach programs are a primary goal of the TFMF mission and offer very important benefits to interested crowds. They also help to increase public awareness by introducing a new cross-section of the population to the festival. This helps keep attendance levels growing. The programs also give attendees the chance to learn from and play with well-known professionals in a one-on-one setting, which is rarely the case at most festivals.

Many of the better-known performers who serve as faculty for the various workshops and schools were once festival attendees or young, aspiring singers themselves. Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, Slaid Cleaves, Butch Hancock, Bobby Bridger, Rick Beresford, Chuck Pyle, Lucinda Williams, James McMurtry, Lindsay Haisley, Hal Ketchum, David Wilcox, Steve Earle, Jimmy LaFave, Tish Hinojosa, John Gorka, David Roth, Eric Taylor, and Martin Sexton are just a few of the musicians who made a name for themselves through the nationally recognized New Folk Competition.<sup>337</sup> Some of these New Folk winners, including Lyle Lovett, Lucinda Williams, Nanci Griffith, and Steve Earle, have gone on to win or be nominated for Grammy Awards.<sup>338</sup> Another Kerrville alumna who gained national success after winning the New Folk Competition is Tish Hinojosa. During her career, Hinojosa has released fifteen albums, and recorded with such singers as Joan Baez, Kris Kristofferson, Dwight

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<sup>337</sup> 1997 Festival Program, Kennedy Collection, Box # 2002-53/12, C.A.H., U.T.; [www.happenstance-music.com/KFF\\_History.asp](http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp), accessed 25 September 2009.

<sup>338</sup> [www.steveearle.com](http://www.steveearle.com); [www.lucindawilliams.com](http://www.lucindawilliams.com); [www.nancigriffith.com](http://www.nancigriffith.com); [www.lylelovet.com](http://www.lylelovet.com), accessed 5 January 2010.

Yoakam, and Pete Seeger.<sup>339</sup> Bobby Bridger is another performer who is internationally known and has performed on such television shows as *Austin City Limits*, *C-Span/Booknotes*, *Good Morning America*, and *A & E*.<sup>340</sup> Another performer, Steve Earle, is recognized as a “master storyteller in his own right.” His songs have been recorded by a number of well-known musicians including Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Joan Baez, Emmylou Harris, and Waylon Jennings.<sup>341</sup>

The friendly and informal atmosphere of the Kerrville Folk Festival is one of the main factors attracting established artists, despite the modest pay. These artists come for the love of the music, the ambiance, and the camaraderie that the festival provides its attendees.

Singer Gail Davies noted this feeling of community when she praised the festival for its “general feeling of camaraderie.”<sup>342</sup> Patty Larkin and Steve Given both referred to the festival as a “religious experience.”<sup>343</sup> Tish Hinojosa stated that “going back to Kerrville always feels like a real family reunion.”<sup>344</sup> Robert Earl Keen also talks about how “the Texas hill country, the people from all walks, the musicians, and the all-night campfire jams keep the place alive.”<sup>345</sup>

Many other artists also recognize the Kerrville Folk Festival as having had a major impact on their careers. Nanci Griffith recalled how meeting her childhood idols,

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<sup>339</sup> [www.mundotish.com](http://www.mundotish.com), accessed 5 January 2010.

<sup>340</sup> [www.bobbybridger.com](http://www.bobbybridger.com), accessed 5 January 2010.

<sup>341</sup> [www.steveearle.com](http://www.steveearle.com), accessed 5 January 2010.

<sup>342</sup> Kennedy, *Music From the Heart*, 358.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 319, 378.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

Carolyn Hester and Tom Paxton, at the Kerrville Folk Festival was a pivotal point in her career.<sup>346</sup> David Amram also mentioned how the “Kerrville Folk Festival reaffirmed everything I’ve loved about Texas since first touring in the 1940s. It’s totally spontaneous, down-home, poetic, beautiful, and for real.”<sup>347</sup>

Rod Kennedy also remembered New Folk winner Hal Ketchum telling him, “I never would have had the nerve to get up on stage if it weren’t for you.”<sup>348</sup> Tish Hinojosa points to her experiences at the festival as leaving her “floating on clouds, high on encouragement, ready to pursue songwriting further,” as well as “the stimulus of her career.”<sup>349</sup> Gail Davies remembers the Kerrville Folk Festival as humbling, exhilarating, and the reason for her return to the stage after six years by “giving her hope to continue writing and singing the kind of music I do and not what the music industry would have me do.”<sup>350</sup>

Although all of these musicians credit the festival with helping to change their lives and careers, Kennedy says he “never tried to be a star maker. What we have tried to do is give new artists some self-esteem and confidence so they can go on about their business and get rid of the shakes.” He also mentions “there are many songwriter competitions now, but Kerrville seems to have the prestige that others don’t,” proclaiming that “agents, managers, and publicists know what a rich resource Kerrville

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<sup>346</sup> John T. Davis, “Kerrville Festival’s Founder Moving On,” *Austin American Statesman*, May 22, 2002.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>349</sup> Kennedy, *Music From the Heart*, 346; Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 448.

<sup>350</sup> Kennedy, *Music From the Heart*, 358.

is.”<sup>351</sup> Today, the festival has become internationally known as a “Mecca for new and traditional folk artists alike.”<sup>352</sup>

The Kerrville Folk Festival has been able to become this type of “Mecca” by building upon the Texas songwriting tradition. Many of the musicians who played and attended the festival during its beginning stages grew up listening to or were mentored by a variety of Texas songwriters. This gave them a direct connection to the diverse range of ethnic musical genres that have “cross-pollinated” over the years to produce a distinctive Texas sound.<sup>353</sup> The eclectic mix of musicians invited to play on the main stage at Kerrville have carried on that tradition of musical cross-pollination in order to keep the states’ songwriting scene vibrant and growing. Over the years, musicians return to Kerrville to listen, share, and learn from well-established artists as well as new songwriters who hope to make their own imprint on the state’s rich musical heritage. The Kerrville Folk Festival provides a welcoming environment for songwriters to be nurtured, mentored, and encouraged to mold their individual stories and eclectic sounds into their own unique style.

The event also keeps the Texas festival tradition alive. Throughout Texas history, groups have gathered together to celebrate their culture and pass along ideas and beliefs from one generation to the next. This is true about the Kerrville Folk Festival as well. Groups from a variety of diverse backgrounds return every year to not only share their music, but to contribute and build upon the unique “Kerr-culture” that has developed at

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<sup>351</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>352</sup> Drew Thomas, “2008 Kerrville Folk Festival Attracts More than One Hundred Musicians,” *Lonehorn Living*, pg. 9, May 7, 2008, Kerrville Folk Festival Vertical Files, C.A.H., U.T.

<sup>353</sup> Hartman, “The Roots Run Deep: An Overview of Texas Music History,” in Clayton and Specht, *The Roots of Texas Music*, 4.

Quiet Valley Ranch. The festival's culture, much like oral folk tradition "articulates family and community history, culture, and values."<sup>354</sup> In addition, the festival's "Kerr-culture" has helped to create a distinctive set of family groups connected to specific campsites across the ranch. Over the years, these groups have created a communal bond that continues to deepen with each succeeding generation. The Kerrville Folk Festival has been integral in both expanding the Texas festival tradition and giving a nurturing environment in which to develop.

### **TFMF Non-Profit Acquisition**

As the TFMF proceeded toward acquiring the festival as a non-profit entity, Stuart Vexler, Michael D'Eath, and others were able to set up an agreement outlining TFMF's purchase of the festival's assets and liabilities. The first main fundraising goal was to ensure that there was adequate support from within the festival community and the city of Kerrville. This would prevent the festival from having to rely too extensively on corporate donors. Fortunately, organizers received a large donation from an anonymous donor, which helped cover a large portion of the total purchase price. For the most part, the remainder of the money was raised from within the local community.<sup>355</sup>

The final sale was completed in December 2008, thereby making the part of the Texas Folk Music Foundation, a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization. This eliminated the Kerrville Folk Festival, Inc., designation that Vaughn Hafner had set up after purchasing

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<sup>354</sup> Hartman, *The History of Texas Music*, 182-183.

<sup>355</sup> Michael D'Eath, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

the festival from Rod Kennedy in 1999. It also reduced the corporate structure to just two boards, the TFMF nine-member board, and the Quiet Valley Ranch Corporation.<sup>356</sup>

The TFMF nine-member board oversees an operating committee that helps make decisions on the day-to-day operations of the festival and the ranch. The former president of Kerrville Folk Festival, Inc., Charlie Lamb, remains the president of the festival, and several of the former Kerrville Folk Festival, Inc., board members serve on Lamb's operating committee team, including Stuart Vexler. Currently, a thirty-year lease has been signed with Quiet Valley Ranch and TFMF, which insures the festival's home for the next three decades.<sup>357</sup> After completing the festival preparations immediately after the acquisition occurred, the board and committee members now hope to turn their attention toward addressing some facility issues.

The TFMF also is interested in hearing the opinions of "Kerr-verts" regarding facility improvements. Before the 2009 festival, Stuart Vexler sent an email to representatives from approximately 70 named campsites to inform them of the "town hall" meeting planned for the Saturday of Land Rush weekend.<sup>358</sup> As he remembers, about 50 people showed up to voice their opinions on a variety of topics, including utilities, noise control, and security. Many older members in attendance were against the idea of adding power and water to all of the meadow area, arguing instead to keep the festival more simple and rustic. Some of these participants jokingly said, "If you can't

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid.; Michael D'Eath mentioned that this did not make TFMF the Kerrville Folk Festival Foundation. It instead made the Kerrville Folk Festival the crown jewel of the other programs and events that they sponsored and played a role in. This acquisition essentially continues the mission of TFMF by helping to spread knowledge and interest in Texas folk music.

<sup>357</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>358</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

camp in a tent, then quit coming.”<sup>359</sup> While others firmly agreed that for safety and health purposes, the addition of these amenities was essential.<sup>360</sup>

This open forum provided an excellent opportunity for organizers to directly hear from a group of festival-goers. However, Vexler also said that he hoped to recruit a wider audience in 2010 by using social networking tools in order to solicit the opinions of younger festival-goers who were not as well represented at this meeting.<sup>361</sup>

### **Looking Toward the Future**

Recently, TFMF has focused its fundraising efforts more locally, trying to attract who might otherwise spend their recreational dollars some place far away.<sup>362</sup> Organizers hope to convince locals that the Kerrville Folk Festival provides an opportunity visit, explore, and experience a whole new culture. These efforts appear to be paying off, as local attendance continues to increase.

Organizers are also working harder than ever to make the festival more of an asset to the broader hill country. For example, TFMF has an outreach program that sends songwriters to entertain and speak to nearby Veterans hospitals, youth centers, and senior centers. Stuart Vexler does not consider this type of involvement in the community as “giving back.” Instead, he sees it as a necessary part of being interwoven into the fabric of the community.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Michael D’Eath, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>360</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>363</sup> Stuart Vexler, Interview with author, Austin, 11 September 2009.

Future expectations for the festival and TFMF involve looking toward increased associations and partnerships with other festivals to help expand and encourage songwriters and musicians. One festival in particular that TFMF has already made connections with is the Rice Festival, in nearby Fischer, Texas. By forging such partnerships, the Kerrville Folk Festival and others are increasing the number of places songwriters and performers can perform.

As the festival moves toward the future, it is essential to attract younger attendees in order to carry on this Texas tradition for generations to come. Through the variety of programs TFMF offers, as well as the eclectic variety of music on the main stage, the festival should be able to continue attracting younger patrons much as it has in the past. Even though it often proves difficult to keep an event such as the Kerrville Folk Festival from becoming a “super-organic” attraction as attendance numbers increase, it appears the dedicated and loyal fan base who attend the festival have no problem doing their part to ensure the “organic” atmosphere stays the same.

As Kennedy mentioned, the atmosphere and experiences at the Kerrville Folk Festival can be life changing to many who attend. As he said, “have you ever had a song or concert impact your emotions or your life?”<sup>364</sup> He then asked to just think about all the festival-goers who come for the full eighteen-day festival. The music heard during that time is bound to have some kind of impression on one’s life by making you think and reflect on things you are normally too busy to ponder.<sup>365</sup> In tribute to his influence on Texas music, musicians, and fans, Rod Kennedy was honored by the Center for Texas Music History on February 2, 2010 at the Paramount Theatre in Austin. “Music from the

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<sup>364</sup> Rod Kennedy, Interview with author, Kerrville, 15 April 2009.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

Heart: An 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Tribute to Rod Kennedy” featured performances by a number of long-time festival artists, including Robert Earl Keen, Marcia Ball, The Flatlanders (Joe Ely, Jimmy Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock), Ruthie Foster, Terri Hendrix, Jimmie LaFave, and others.

As the Kerrville Folk Festival continues into the next decade, it is unclear as to whether it will continue the legacy of opening doors for future songwriters, and giving them the opportunity to thrive in a nurturing environment. Hopefully, this unique Texas songwriting institution will continue well into the future and will provide younger generations the opportunity to enjoy and learn about the Texas songwriting tradition, and the music and fellowship that makes the Kerrville Folk Festival so special.

## **CHAPTER V:**

### **CONCLUSION**

Texas music is well-known for its blend of musical traditions. As people from a variety of ethnic, social, religious, and educational backgrounds migrated to the area, their music “cross-pollinated” to form styles that are unique to the Lone Star State. Festivals have long served an important role in allowing various groups to join together and share their musical culture with one another in a communal atmosphere. The process of storytelling through song also provided early Texans with an effective way to communicate their history and culture to succeeding generations. Many important Texas songwriters have had a profound influence on the national music scene including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Scott Joplin, Cindy Walker, Carolyn Hester, Steve Earle, Townes Van Zandt, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, Willie Nelson, The Dixie Chicks, Ray Wylie Hubbard, and Eliza Gilkyson.

The Kerrville Folk Festival has played an integral role in giving these and many other songwriters a place to learn, mentor, and flourish while contributing to the state’s rich musical heritage. Over the past four decades, the Kerrville Folk Festival has become an internationally recognized institution that has also helped shape the national music scene.

The festival’s history has been a long and often difficult one. A series of weather-related problems in the late 1970s nearly brought financial ruin to the festival. Luckily,

organizers, performers, and attendees banded together and helped raise enough funds to keep the festival going. The initial camaraderie that was created during these troubled early years helped form the foundation for the festival's long-term success and its unique sense of community.

During the 1980s, the festival continued to build upon this sense of camaraderie, creating a genuine "organic" atmosphere where festival-goers could relax from their daily work routine and return to a simpler life at Quiet Valley Ranch. One of the major themes noted throughout this study addresses the recognition of this communal bond amongst festival attendees, staff, and musicians. These groups rallied together during the festival's troubled times to forge this strong connection with one another. They look forward to getting back together every year, similar to a large family reunion. This open, accepting, and friendly environment is part of what makes the festival such an appealing place to visit. In fact, as one exits the festival, you are reminded by the sign near the gate that "it can be this way always." This statement reminds you that it is possible to incorporate this genuine welcoming attitude into your everyday lifestyle.

Another unique aspect of the festival that began to emerge during the 1980s is the so-called "Kerr-culture." This is reflected in a series of impromptu events and traditions, including naming the campsites and the proliferation of campfire jam sessions. For many attendees, the campground music is the life-blood of the festival, and one of the main attractions for bringing aspiring and seasoned musicians back every year. It is quite amazing how much talent can actually be heard playing at any given campsite throughout the length of the festival. It is this non-contrived atmosphere and feeling that has allowed musicians to grow and mentor one another so successfully. In fact, the festival has

developed an international reputation for recruiting first-rate singer-songwriters. Such artists as Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, Darden Smith, Steve Earle, and Lucinda Williams gained some of their first national exposure through the festival's New Folk Songwriters Competition. These and other aspects of "Kerr-culture" are a major reason why so many festival-goers return year after year. It is also what distinguishes the Kerrville Folk Festival from other folk and singer-songwriter festivals of its kind.

Despite gaining international recognition during the 1970s and 1980s, the festival struggled with debt and bad weather, eventually forcing organizers to file for bankruptcy in 1990. However, this setback did not stop the festival's momentum. By the 1990s, it was setting record attendance of as high as 30,000 for the 18-day event. This is a huge growth from its modest beginnings at the Kerrville Auditorium where attendance totals reached 2,800 for the 3-day event. As the festival entered the twenty-first century, it became recognized as a "Mecca" for singer-songwriters, where they could learn, grow, and thrive in a genuine environment.

In 2003, festival founder Rod Kennedy handed over leadership of the festival to his longtime assistant Dalis Allen. With Allen at the helm, the festival has become more involved with the local community through a variety of outreach programs, while also working to expand listenership and the number and variety of artists. Hopefully, this study will bring greater public attention to the unique history and culture of the Kerrville Folk Festival and encourage further research into this important and now legendary Texas musical institution.

Although this is the first academic study of the Kerrville Folk Festival and its history, there are still many aspects of the festival that have yet to be examined in detail.

It is particularly important for future researchers to conduct additional oral interviews with longtime festival participants, including both staff and attendees. The Texas Folk Music Foundation is currently working to collect as many oral interviews as possible, with an emphasis on festival staff and volunteers. Once archived and made available to the public, these interviews will be a great help to those conducting future research on the festival. There are also documents and other information from the Kerrville Folk Festival business office that are not included with Rod Kennedy's collection housed at the University of Texas in Austin. These materials could provide useful information regarding the inner workings of the festival. Another aspect of the festival that deserves further study is the phenomenon known as "Kerr-culture." Not only does a "Kerr-culture" exist on the larger festival level, but each individual camping area has its own set of traditions that it participates in every year. It would be interesting to investigate these unique personalities and customs more thoroughly in order to gain a more complete understanding of this special aspect of the festival.

It is evident that over the past thirty-eight years, the Kerrville Folk Festival has had a long-term impact on both the state and national music scene. Organizers currently involved with the festival do their best to continue Rod Kennedy's legacy and strong commitment to maintaining an "organic" atmosphere that gives songwriters the opportunity to thrive in front of genuine audiences who are eager to listen. The Kerrville Folk Festival has also played a significant role in building relationships between multiple generations of songwriters and festival-goers. By sharing and teaching across these generational lines, through the Kerrville Folk Festival and by other means, the rich and

diverse musical traditions found in Texas will continue to evolve and remain vibrant in the future.

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