

# 30 years of music & memories

## Gather 'round the campfire and listen to the tale of Kerrville's Folk Festival: A Texas tradition blossoming from scraggly roots

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Like the geologic formations that shape the contours of the surrounding Hill Country, the life span of the Kerrville Folk Festival is measured in epochs. Ancient legends handed down tell of the festival's origins in the Kerrville Municipal Auditorium in 1972; with the move outdoors to Quiet Valley Ranch outside of town on Texas 16 two years later, a sort of musical biosphere was created where, soon enough, strange life-forms began to arise and evolve.

From those primitive beginnings, Kerrville has progressed through eras that saw native Texas singer-songwriters arise to complement, and often supplant, the folk-singing icons of a previous generation. The first soundtracks to the festival were issued on LP, that Bronze Age of audio technology. Now, festival compilations are available on CD and are broadcast daily on the festival Web site ([www.kerrville-music.com](http://www.kerrville-music.com)), so Kerrverts from Boston to Bangladesh to Brazil can indulge themselves without making the pilgrimage to Texas. Digital media for an analog art form.

Throughout all the permutations (and, some malcontents would say, perversions), the vision of the Kerrville Folk Festival has remained largely unaltered: "We looked around in the early '70s and saw that there were lots of really good songwriters who were not finding an audience," wrote founder-producer Rod Kennedy in 1992. "So we decided we would produce a folk festival in Kerrville . . . and focus on presenting the songwriters we believed in to a larger audience than they might find in the coffeehouses and clubs of the time . . . We are continuing to encourage and protect the values we feel are so worthwhile and important as we all try to survive the impersonal, homogenized and often lowest common denominator commercialism of living in the '90s."

Kennedy and his ex-wife (and, as Kennedy describes her today, "earth mother" of the festival), Nancy Lee, poured literal blood, sweat and tears into the caliche-laced soil of Quiet Valley Ranch. Thanks to their perseverance, stubbornness and Rod's oft-remarked-upon cussedness (hey, the guy's an ex-Marine, which is nearly an oxymoron), the festival has survived flood, bankruptcy, changing musical tastes, recession and inflation, and enough sundry catastrophes to make Job cry uncle.

Last weekend, Kennedy, 71, was in the festival office, stuffing news releases into envelopes, readying yet another in an endless series of mass mailings, just as he has done since, oh, about 1956, when he began his promotions career at KHFI-FM in Austin. He was limping around, in deference to a back injury, but giving no quarter. He has been accused of being a control freak,

and he would probably take the description as a compliment.

And yet the qualities that make the festival so special and enduring are tenuous and intangible, beyond even Kennedy's legendary grasp.

The sign at the main entrance to Quiet Valley Ranch says "Welcome Home," but it is the musicians and audience (as well as hyper-dedicated staff and volunteers) that have created a sense of annual community; it's not the sort of quality that can be imposed from the top.

Sometime not long after the festival moved outdoors in 1974, campers on the 63-acre site began to gather around campfires for song-swapping sessions after the evening concerts concluded. More often than not, the featured performers would drift out to join them, erasing the distinction between performer and audience, amateur and pro, leaving only the essence of music and experience shared.

Today, as they did then, the campfire sessions go on all night. Israeli singer-songwriter David Broza (who is performing once again this year) painted the scene from the musician's perspective in a letter from the road: "I find myself playing some of the most fascinating remote locations in the world," he wrote, "yet I'll be selling the people on the festival where the music never stops. The show is over at 1 a.m., but that's when we all get charged up and ready to roll around the seductive fires spread throughout the campgrounds. We musicians join accountants on guitars, chiropractors on bass and attorneys on banjo. . . ."

About.com music columnist Hugh Blumenfeld described Kerrville thus: "No festival lasts longer or creates more community."

On a salubrious late-spring night with the festival in full bloom, the woodsmoke rises over the valley; the firelight flickers between bodies silhouetted around the fires; there is the silvery ring of a guitar, a mandolin or a fiddle echoing from a dozen directions . . . It could almost be a scene from another century, around the time of the Civil War perhaps, with a great army encamped, recounting tales of one battle and readying for the next.

That is if, of course, you can ignore the jammed vehicles parked every which way, the high-tech Gore-Tex tents and RVs, the dead blue glow of laptop computers and Palm Pilots, the ubiquitous empty beer cans, the cicadalike buzz of cell phones, and all the other harbingers of civilization that can conspire to render Quiet Valley Ranch anything but.

Still, it all seems unbearably romantic and communal, especially compared with the soul-deadening experience of going to a modern concert event, with its body searches at the gate, its extortionate concessions, its relentless corporate marketing and its totalitarian security -- all concocted, seemingly, to make the average consumer (which is how the industry regards its audience) feel like a captive in a giant barbed-wire mall.

Kerrville stands, at its best, as the antithesis to all that, and for 30 years, it has been welcoming back its patrons -- "Kerrverts," in the festival lexicon -- who return each spring to the Texas Hill Country, as regularly as the swallows of Capistrano.

The children (some of them surely conceived at the festival late at night when the campfires had dimmed to coals) of the original audience are bringing their own kids now, telling them old-time tales of spine-tingling performances, apocryphal thunderstorms, clandestine skinny-dips in the nearby Medina River, and you-shoulda-been-there tales that invariably feature today's stars (Guy Clark, Lyle Lovett, Ani DiFranco, Nanci Griffith, Steve Earle, Mary Chapin Carpenter, the Dixie Chicks, Robert Earl Keen and the proverbial many others . . .) when they were still wet behind the ears.

Kerrville at 30 was impossible to imagine for those first pioneer fans. But thanks to their support, and that of the musicians, and the indefatigable spirit of the founders and staff, Kerrville at 50 and beyond seems nearly inevitable. At least most days it does. . . .

Does it feel like 30 years?, a visitor to Quiet Valley Ranch asked Rod Kennedy recently. "Yeah, it does," he replied in a tired voice. But it had already been a long day in a series of long weeks, his back was hurting, and there was so much left to do before the gates opened to admit this year's pilgrims.

There is, however, as Kennedy surely knows, a ready though intangible antidote to the stress, the fatigue and the endless grind: Mix a Hill Country evening with firelight, camaraderie and music mixed eight notes to the bar, three verses, a chorus and a bridge. Available without prescription. Administer nightly as necessary. Repeat for 30 years.