

*A
Tradition
Begins...*

First-Annual Midwest Mandolin Festival

by Allen Richmond

Amidst the picturesque setting of Summit Lake State Park, near New Castle, Indiana, the Mandolin Society of Central Indiana (MSCI) kicked off the First-Annual Midwest Mandolin Festival, sponsored by Frank's Violins of Indianapolis, on Saturday, June 11, 2005, drawing in over 125 musicians, performers and mandolin aficionados from eight states, and from as far away as Texas and New Mexico.

From 11 A.M. to 7 P.M., the mandolin took center stage in a variety of ways. Previewing the day's events were two forty-five minute workshops: Mark Kurkowski led a Mandolin Chord workshop, and members of MandolIndy (the performance ensemble of MSCI) gave an Introduction to the Mandolin. Following a warm welcome and brief overview of the day's events by the Master of Ceremonies and Festival founder, Jerry Chapman of Indianapolis, performers from around the Midwest took the stage in turn to share their flavor of the mandolin with everyone.

Johnandrew Bellner opened the first half of the day with traditional Celtic music and an original composition for mandolin and guitar. "It's called *Untitled*, but we're open to suggestions," he quipped. Mark Kurkowski, mandolin, and Mario Joven, guitar, stepped into the Jazz groove, highlighting the chordal style of legend Jethro Burns with such tunes as *Autumn Leaves* and *Take Five*.

MandolIndy next shared several works for small mandolin ensemble, including a Renaissance Air by Henry Purcell, *Rataplan*, composed by early Twentieth-Century mandolin ensemble composer Johan Kok, and an introspective setting of the traditional tune *Down in the Valley*. In a smooth segue, covering the Americana portion of the day, Buckdancer's Choice, featuring Kevin Strunk, performed such pieces as *I Am A Pilgrim* and the Robert Johnson tune *Four Until Late*.

Reviving a sound that predates both Jazz and Bluegrass, the Dayton Mandolin Orchestra rounded out the first half of the day's stage performers. The orchestra was the featured Special Guest Artist for this year's Midwest Mandolin Festival, and provided a veritable cornucopia of mandolin orchestra music. Several colorful works were presented, which highlighted Italian, Spanish, North and South American mandolin music of the last two centuries. Of special note, the orchestra presented the Indiana debut of *Grandmother's Ghost*, recently written by Baltimore, Maryland, composer Jonathan Jensen (mandolinetist with the Baltimore Mandolin Quartet), which received an enthusiastic response from the audience.

At the mid-day break, two hour-long workshops were held concurrently: Jerry Chapman hosted a Mandolin Backup Chord session, and Homer Pass and Mike Butler held a Blues workshop. Those not attending the workshops enjoyed such diversions as sharing stories, mando-tastings, and hearing a special broadcast of the "Fields of Bluegrass" radio program, dedicated to the First-Annual Midwest Mandolin Festival, hosted by Cary Allen Fields of WICR-FM, Indianapolis.

The Miami Valley Mandolin Quintet began the second half of the day's musical festivities with an interesting mix of ragtime, novelty and popular pieces, including a colorful setting of Leroy Anderson's 1952 hit song, *Blue Tango*. MVMQ made its Indiana debut at this year's festival, and set into motion what proved to be a truly eclectic start to the second half of the day.

The Slates Family Band provided a robust serving of “down-home music served up family-style,” featuring music of John Prine and Woody Guthrie; followed by il Troubadore, billed as “Indy’s only 16th Century Rock Band” – a designation which the duo team of mandolinist/vocalist Robert Bruce Scott and violoncellist Jonathan Silpayamanat fulfilled with oddly-enjoyable – and quaintly Renaissancian – settings of pieces such as the BeeGee’s ‘70s hit, *Staying Alive*, the Beatles’ *Here Comes the Sun*, and an original piece entitled *Bonnie Rose*.

Highlighting the second half of the day’s program was 2004 American Old Time Country Music Hall of Fame inductee Homer Pass, accompanied by Mike Butler. Homer, 79 years young and as alive as ever, originally hails from Lenoir City, Tennessee, and Mike has roots from Centerville, Indiana. Besides playing with various musicians and bands over the years, Homer was a good friend of Jethro Burns and his brother, Archie. In addition to a selection of Blues numbers, Homer and Mike featured several works of Yank Rachell: *Roll Me Over*, *Tappin’ That Thing*, and *Milk Cow Blues*, among others.

Of course, what mandolin festival would be complete without the familiar sound of Bluegrass mandolin? True to form, John Gates and Harvey Mosteller, members of “The Folk Grass Explosion” and “1100 South”, provided the icing on the day’s proverbial cake, performing such rousing favorites as *Old Joe Clark*, *Eva Marie* and Bill Monroe’s perennial classic, *Rawhide*, after which the crowd rose to its feet.

Several people commented on how wonderful the music was, and how the whole positive atmosphere at the Festival impressed them. Bill Foley, who drove seven hours one-way from Wisconsin to attend, commented, “I thought Jerry Chapman and all did a great job organizing the event. The park is a great setting, and the weather stayed cool. I was interested in hearing people I had not heard before...there was a good cross-section of talent.” “Quite a pleasant outing,” added Michael Hitchcock, from Yellow Springs, Ohio. “It was fun to schmooze with other musicians and check out the players. We got a break on the weather and met some interesting people in the audience.”

After the Festival’s conclusion, I asked founder Jerry Chapman what he thought of the success of this first-annual event. “The day ran smoothly, with all the performances starting and stopping on time, and the sound guys did an excellent job mixing everything from duets to a 15-piece mandolin orchestra. The diversity of styles of music provided a showcase for the mandolin, demonstrating its versatility and ensuring everyone there heard something they liked. The atmosphere was very laid-back and relaxed; people were friendly, even to the point of sharing food and drinks. The musicians were all approachable, and most stayed for much or all of the day. I think this was a wonderful inaugural festival.” Plans are already under consideration for next year’s Midwest Mandolin Festival.

For more information about the Mandolin Society of Central Indiana, or the 2006 Midwest Mandolin Festival, visit MSCI’s website at <http://www.mandolindy.com/> or contact Jerry Chapman at jerchap2@juno.com via email.

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