



NEWS PHOTO BY JOHN ASHTON

A fun-loving, well-behaved crowd whoops it up at Telluride.

Telluride festival's slice of a 'hipbilly's' heaven

By JOHN ASHTON
— News Staff

TELLURIDE — The ninth annual Telluride Bluegrass and Country Music Festival was a real slice of "hipbilly" heaven.

The "goodest ol' boy of 'em all, country crooner Willie Nelson, was there — with two sleek buses ("On the road again," read a sign on one of them) and an entourage of about 50 folks.

The Band's drummer, Levon Helm, was there — stepping out on stage now and then with Russell (Amazing Rhythm Aces) Smith and a group of hot studio musicians called the Muscle Shoals All Stars.

Chicagoan-turned-southern-Californian Steve Goodman, wearing a Cubs baseball cap, was there — proving once again he is one of the most inventive, humorous and perceptive of modern songwriters — and a very friendly and unassuming guy.

So were the Dillards (the Rodney Dillard branch); flat-picker Norman Blake from Rising Fawn, Ga.; "Rattlesnake" Annie McGowan (who conducted a fantastic singing workshop for children Sunday morning); Colorado's Hot Rize, probably the most unique and talented bluegrass group in the state; country music's Entertainer of the Year, Ricky Skaggs, and the new (more rock-n-rolly) New Grass Revival, appearing without Oklahoma's raspy warbler, Leon Russell, with whom they had toured for about two years.

For many of the more than 5,000 people who attended last weekend's festival, the unexpected highlight of the three-day event was the appearance Friday night of a baby-faced California cowboy named Peter Rowan, who played everything from his specialized Tex-Mex, to reggae, to incredible Indian chants.

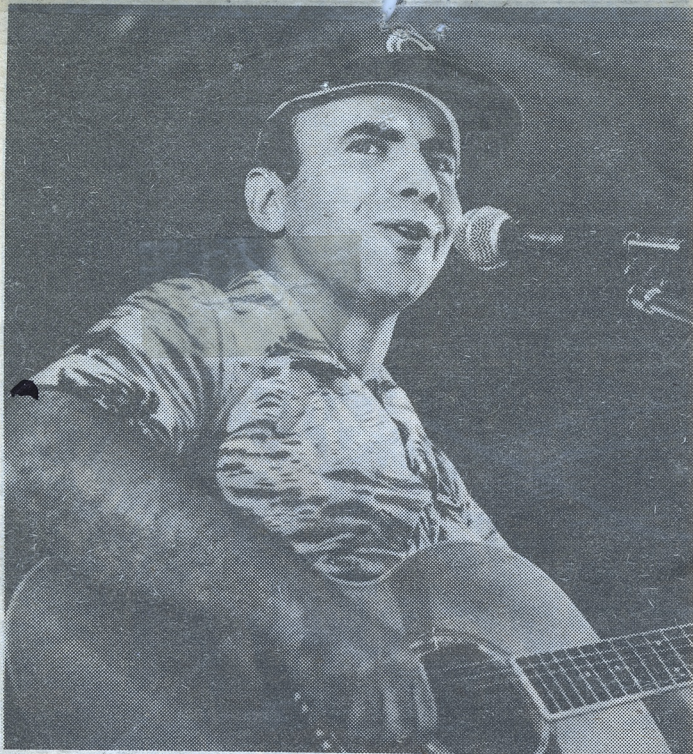
The fun-loving, but nonetheless well-behaved crowd stretched out under boiling hot sun during the day and huddled together for warmth and whatever in the crisp, cold nights. The spectators this year seemed to be more appreciative and enthusiastic than usual.

As an excited, almost hyper Smith said after coming out for an encore, "We came to play, not to go away." And he spoke for the audience, as well.

The crowd came prepared, with knapsacks, coolers, food, sleeping bags, short-legged lawn chairs, tarps, spray bottles (for cooling off), and other supplies. There was no alcohol allowed in the Town Park festival site, but the local public radio station — KOTO — reportedly sold more than 20,000 cans of 3.2 beer during the three days and nights of the festival's 20 acts.

Medical personnel on the scene reported no serious mishaps, and only a very few of the usual outdoor-festival-type maladies brought on by overexposure to the elements and/or pathological overindulgence.

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Inventive Steve Goodman, noted Cub fan, was a hit at Telluride.

Top musicians get together for festive time in Telluride

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Backstage, amid the touring buses and under the refreshment tents, musicians from all across the country — New York boys who now hail from Colorado or Alabama, say, and genuine country boys with twangs thick as sorghum — gathered in small groups, trading guitar and mandolin and banjo licks picked elsewhere in their travels.

The festival experience is a collection of impressions and observations, and here are some I had during three glorious days of music, fun and camaraderie in Telluride:

● Peter Rowan (with his backup band, the Free Mexican Air Force), has got to be one of the most entertaining and unheralded acts in the country. Rowan has dynamic stage presence, and a great tenor voice with which he yodels, croons, howls, belts, and does an Indian chant so haunting and sweet that it brings chills to your spine.

He'll do a country-rock-like ballad, "Midnight Moonlight," one time, then do a reggae — his slower version of "Johnny, You're Too Bad" was beautiful — then come up with more country, then go into a frantic "nuevo-wavo" song called "Can't Get Mellow."

● Sam Bush and John Cowan have picked up two new musicians to play with them in the New Grass Revival. They are banjo picker extraordinaire Bela Fleck, and one of the fastest guitar pickers around, Pat Flynn. The old New Grass broke up just before last year's bluegrass festival, primarily over differences of musical styles.

The two new guys that Bush and Cowan picked up fit them perfectly, and most musicians at the festival agree that the New Grass Revival is the best bet among bluegrass groups to become famous.

● The Dillards, with Rodney Dillard at the helm, and old pal Dean Webb on mandolin, specialize in turning bluegrass songs into rock 'n' roll and other songs, like the Beatles' "We Can Work It Out," into bluegrass songs. They're okay, but nothing special.

● Levon Helm and Russell Smith with the Muscle Shoals All Stars

were almost exclusively rock 'n' roll. Smith, whose "Third-Rate Romance, Low-Rent Rendezvous" is already a country classic, was positively beaming and bursting with joy — not only to be playing with such hot-shot musicians and a big star like Helm, but also because of the audience's loud and loving reception.

Helm, by the way, has become something of a movie celebrity. He played Sissy Spacek's father in "Coal Miner's Daughter," and will costar in "The Right Stuff," based on the Tom Wolfe book about the early days of supersonic and space flight.

● In the traditional Sunday gospel set, the stage was filled with performers. John Cowan, Pat Flynn and Bela Fleck from New Grass Revival were there with Peter Rowan and his backup singer Donna Martire, and Washboard Chaz, Hot Rize's Tim O'Brien, the Android Sisters (who harmonize on '40s swing tunes) and even master of ceremonies Pastor Mustard.

When they sang "Amazing Grace," this makeshift band didn't know the words, so they had to pass a red gospel songbook back and forth among the group.

● Steve Goodman, without beard and mustache, but with his customary good nature, provided some of the best moments of the festival. His songs focus on everyday life, but in a unique and appreciative way.

He does songs on old people ice skating, on the plight of Chicago Cubs' fans, on staying in a cheap motel, on living with a woman who cooks only vegetarian food. His "A Letter to Penthouse Forum," is a great piece of satire.

During his rendition of "The Auctioneer's Song," Goodman broke a string — lots of musicians broke strings in the high altitude and chilly evenings. But he didn't miss a beat. For about five minutes, he sang without musical accompaniment, making up rhymes about his plight until a technician came to his aid. It was an impressive display of imagination, and the crowd loved it.